

THE LAUREL AND THE THORN

*Lately our poets loiter'd in green lanes,
Content to catch the ballads of the plains;
I fancied I had strength enough to climb
A loftier station at no distant time,
And might securely from intrusion doze
Upon the flowers thro' which Illissus flows.
In those pale olive grounds all voices cease,
And from afar dust fills the paths of Greece.
My slumber broken and my doublet torn,
I find the laurel also bears a thorn.*

W. S. LANDOR

THE LAUREL AND THE THORN

A Study of
G. F. WATTS

by
RONALD CHAPMAN

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On February 23rd, 1817, George Frederic Watts was born in a bare dingy house in Queen's Street, Bryanston Square. There was some attempt at good taste about the place, a few engravings of Greuze and a few books by Scott and Jane Austen, but on the whole it was easy to see that there was more pretention than ability to keep up appearances. The rooms were dark and painfully devoid of furniture, the corridors were untidy, and there was a general atmosphere of bad management about the house. To be born in such a place was not an auspicious beginning.

Watts' father was at this time a tall, lean, delicately featured man with large melancholy eyes and a despondent droop to his mouth. His hair which was greying was brushed away from his brow giving him a fine, almost a noble appearance. It was rumoured later on (without any truth) that he was the illegitimate son of the great Lord Holland. George Watts was a disappointed man. He had not always had those lines about his mouth, and his eyes had once possessed something more than their present melancholy intensity. Some years before the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, he had left his native Hereford bent on making his fortune in London. A born enthusiast, he had had visions of storming the metropolis, of becoming rich and famous. In Hereford he had worked in his father's carpentry shop. He had also picked up a good deal about the manufacture of musical instruments and it was on that craft he set his ambitions.

But life in Georgian London was not what he had expected. To him as to Haydon, who had come rattling over the cobbles through Kensington on the Plymouth coach at about the same time, there was an irresistible attraction about the vitality of London. There was the hoarse roar of the thoroughfares, the jingle of harness, the rumbling of carts over the pavings which sent a tingle of blood into an ambitious man's heart. There was something impelling to the countryman in the brutal restlessness of the place. And to the reflective there were the strange pools of quiet in the unfrequented squares, which soothed the nerves like an opiate. And then out again in the surge of the main streets there were the gaily painted coaches spinning in from their journeys over the MacAdam from the counties—life blood, as it were, being drawn to the heart of England.

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this was where he was to shine, George Watts thought to himself! And certainly no-one could deny his son had exceptional facility. At the age of ten, the year after his mother died, he was apprenticed in the studio of William Behnes, the sculptor.

There were three Behnes brothers, sons of a Hanoverian piano manufacturer, and at this time they were all living together in Dean Street, Soho. William, the eldest, was a fierce impulsive man in his thirties. He had started life in his father's trade, but had given it up for sculpture, and was at this time becoming prominent. But his lack of discretion and perversity of character were to ruin him. It did not seem likely in 1827, but in the sixties he was to die on the streets, bankrupt and forgotten. At present, however, there was a plenitude of energy and confidence in the sculpture studio. From morning till late in the evening Watts would be there, unobtrusively helping in all the tasks and often singing for joy.

With Henry, the second brother, Watts seems to have had no connection. It was Charles, the youngest, who was his friend. Charles was deformed and a cripple. He found it interesting to look after the newcomer in his brother's studio. He was a great reader, a sort of oracle in the household, and something of a Liberal. He introduced the boy to the literary classics and gave him scientific books to read. In the evenings the two of them—the cripple hunched forward in his chair and young Watts with his lean pale face alight with interest and pushing back his long curling black locks from his eyes as he talked—would discuss Ossian and Shakespeare till the shadows had lengthened into darkness.

Watts probably did not learn very much with William Behnes. Behnes was a fine draughtsman, but he notoriously neglected his pupils. In any case he did not paint, and the introduction of the boy to this medium fell to a miniature painter, a friend of Charles. This man lent Watts a Lely to copy. The copy was a great success and showed everyone for the first time that the child was exceptionally gifted. Fortunately the praise did not go to his head. With characteristic seriousness, however, young Watts thought out a joke. He copied a Van Dyck and put it up the chimney. When he presented the picture to Behnes covered in dust and soot he hesitatingly suggested that the painting was a genuine Van Dyck. The sculptor looked at it carefully: 'Well, I should not venture to say that it is by Van Dyck, but it certainly is by no mean hand'.¹ People heard this story and began to take the boy seriously.

On the strength of his son's reputation at Behnes' studio George Watts took along a portfolio of drawings to Sir Martin Archer Shee, who had

¹ M. S. Watts, *George Frederic Watts, The Annals of an artist's life*. 3 vols. London, 1912, i, p. 23.

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become President of the Academy after Lawrence. Sir Martin who was no lover of High Art probably sensed the piano-maker's ambitious projects. At all events he made no further comment on the drawings than: 'I can see no reason why your son should take up the profession of art'.¹ The elder Watts, however, was not in the least dashed. He had made up his mind that his son was a genius long before. Haydon had shown that it was possible to doubt whether even a President of the Academy was any judge. And was it not known that Archer Shee was a notorious versifier and man about town, one of whose plays had, to everyone's amusement, unaccountably been banned by the censor?

A similar encounter also took place at this time. Watts was going home from the studio with his sketchbook in his hand when he was stopped by a fatish breezy little man with prominent compelling eyes behind small spectacles. It was Haydon, the famous exponent of grand manner painting. He laid a hand on Watts' shoulder: 'May a fellow student look at your work?'² He spoke encouragingly and asked the boy to his studio. Through shyness, however, or for some other reason Watts never went. But it was enough. The mantle of High Art in England had in some sort been passed on.

Meanwhile the boy dreamed his dreams. He was already hag-ridden with genius. He would be a great painter. It is not to be wondered at that he took himself intensely seriously. He had no intimate friends of his age, and no companion save Charles Behnes, who was twenty years older and a cripple. Later he was to confide his worries and aspirations to women and to become acquainted with a large number of distinguished men. But what he never succeeded in doing was to make a real friend. Even in the later intimacies he would show but part of himself. And the reason was not that he lacked charm or humanity—he had both to an unusual extent—but may be traced to the loneliness of his early years; from the beginning he was unable to interest himself in people outside himself. His concern, he felt and delighted to feel, was with the serious visions of beauty within.

These dreams of greatness turned him giddy with ecstasy. Gradually he began to live for them, to build his life round them, and in the end he almost became the dream. He longed for a name more musical and more noble than Watts. He used to think how pleasant it must be to belong to a great family and feel bound to uphold its name. As consolation he imagined that he was at least the heir to the great masters of the past.

As yet the dreamer was only a pale-faced boy with a very serious expression and long black hair. His interest for the moment was divided between the Elgin Marbles which Behnes had taught him to appreciate, and appli-

¹ M. S. Watts, p. 22.

² Ibid., p. 23.

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cation to the technique of the traditional English school. He was making a very careful study of anatomy.

But affairs at home were going from bad to worse. The elder Watts was becoming more desultory as scheme after scheme failed. He was now giving elementary lessons in music, tuning pianos and doing any clerical work that came his way. Although young Watts was at sixteen already undertaking small portraits in pencil and chalk for five shillings apiece he determined to finish off his artistic education by joining the Academy School. He was admitted in 1835.

[ii]

Watts was only eighteen and looked much younger, but from now on he had to fend for himself. The world of 1835 which he was now entering for the first time as a man was in a state of transition. It was the coaching world of *Pickwick*. But it was also the England of the *Tracts for the Times*. Only three years had gone by since the passing of the Reform Bill, and two years still remained before Princess Victoria should ascend the throne. It was a time of preparation. The great men of the nineteenth century had not yet achieved fame. Two years previously Newman, becalmed in a sailing ship between Marseilles and Sicily, had written *Lead, kindly Light*. Darwin had embarked in 1831 on the *Beagle* for South America and had not yet returned. Tennyson and Browning were promising young poets but not generally known, while Dickens was still a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. Carlyle had not published his *French Revolution*, Ruskin had not come up to Christ Church, Disraeli was not in Parliament. Only Gladstone, as Under-secretary for War and Colonies, was in the saddle.

Painting was in a less uncertain position than the other arts. Wilkie was the most popular artist of the day and, though he was now under the influence of the Spanish style, he was still full of vigour. Turner was at his greatest and was enjoying a fair measure of success. Constable exhibited *The Valley Farm* this year. He was still quite unrecognized. Lawrence had said on his election to the Academy that he was lucky to get in at all. Etty was painting furiously for the art dealers to keep himself from debt. Mulready was a solid success.

Among the younger men Landseer sent in *The Highland Drover's Departure* to the year's Academy. The *Athenaeum*, rather beside the point, suggested that the animals were given unnecessary prominence considering the title of the picture. Eastlake, future President of the Academy, was getting that deep practical knowledge of art in its relation to government and society which was to stand him in good stead when the future queen

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married. Maclise, moving about in intellectual society, was sketching famous men under the pseudonym of Alfred Crocquis. But portraiture as a whole had fallen to a low level. Only Pickersgill and Phillips were left to carry on the tradition of the previous century.

In general there was a considerable feeling for High Art, which only petered away as the century advanced. Ever since the foundation of the Academy there had been sporadic attempts to wean English painters from the 'low realism' of portraiture and turn them to the 'High Art' which derived from Michelangelo. The Grand Manner, as it was called, was lofty, imaginative, in its English form often moral. It was opposed to the realism of the Dutch masters and the humour of Hogarth. But the English climate or the English character, too phlegmatic, too Gothic, or too realistic, was against High Art. West, the founder of the historical school, was certainly an unprecedented success, but the best artists always saw through his vanity and very soon after his death a reaction set in. Barry—a vehement exponent of High Art if ever there was one—was by no means universally accepted and his reputation vanished at his death. Haydon defiantly carried on the tradition but his pictures brought him little money and he gradually came to rely more and more on lectures and articles with which to disseminate his High Art views. His championship of the Elgin Marbles added to his reputation, but like Barry he had fallen foul of the Academy which had become the stronghold of portraiture, and his life was passed in fierce feuds with his opponents. In 1835 it looked as if a school, under the influence if not the direct patronage of Haydon, might be formed. But it was more of a hope than an expectation and it was in direct opposition to the main trends of nineteenth century England. Hilton was the only Grand Mannerist of note to exhibit this year at the Academy. Haydon was in desperate straits. While his wife was actually in labour he had to take down his drawings to the parlour to raise money. All his attempts to interest Melbourne about the decoration of public buildings met with no success.

Watts made quite a splash at the Academy School. Even gruff old Hilton who was the keeper became human with his young pupil with the long locks and high ideals. When he missed the prize for drawing Hilton whispered in Watts' ear: 'Never mind, you ought to have had it'. And he used to point to Watts' easel and say: 'That is the way I like to see a drawing done.'¹ But when the young man brought him a picture he had painted of a dying knight he warned him against imaginative compositions. Did he not know full well that nearly all his huge compositions remained unsold? Watts listened politely, but decided with the passionate

¹ M. S. Watts, p. 26.

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logic of youth that what applied to old Hilton did not apply to himself. The dangers Hilton warned him against made him only the more eager to attempt to carry out his lofty plans.

The young man's aim was no less than to follow in the footsteps of the old masters, to make of English art as great an achievement as Italian. He dreamed already of becoming England's Michelangelo. West and Barry might have failed. Haydon, it is true, could not be regarded as a success. All the English Grand Mannerists of the past had their obvious faults. But even so why should not he, Watts, succeed? Hope and confidence blew like a wind through England, and Watts was young. He was exceptionally gifted and his work in the traditional manner of the English School was already of great merit. When he developed a little it was to place him among the great painters of England. It was not his gifts but his ambition which was sadly to betray him. But as yet he only worked and dreamed his golden dreams.

But nobility of purpose demands a good education. Watts had had none. He had read his father's books, and those Charles Behnes had lent him, but he felt shamefully ignorant. With tireless energy therefore he set out to acquire the rudiments of the knowledge which he had not learnt at school. He was fortunate in being helped by a most original schoolmaster called Nicholas Wanostrocht. Like all good schoolmasters he was a master in spite of himself, for he had inherited an Academy at Blackheath from his father. His one passion was cricket and he became one of the famous cricketers of his day under the pseudonym of Felix. And under that name he wrote a most entertaining book called *Felix on the Bat*. It was typical of the man that the frontispiece should consist of a highly coloured picture of himself skimming about on the wings of a bat.

Watts found it pleasant after long hours in his studio to wander through the hospitable gates of the Academy at Blackheath. In summer he was certain to hear the knock of bat on ball from the playing field, and often he would come on Wanostrocht in high satisfaction setting up a strange mechanical contraption on the pitch surrounded by a knot of respectful but excited boys. This was Wanostrocht's famous catapulta by means of which he hoped to eliminate the bowler for purposes of practice.

Old George Watts, if he came, still deep in his loftier invention, would critically admire the apparatus and retire to talk with Wanostrocht's brother who was an inventor too. While they paced about the garden, dreaming and arguing together, and while Wanostrocht was absorbed in his catapulta or thinking out a good surface for the handle of a bat, Watts would go to a secluded place and work. If a music lesson was in progress—it was the sort of place where games and work were properly confused—

the young painter would take his place among the boys and learn to sing. He had a good voice and throughout his life music was his one real relaxation.

At the Academy he began to learn German and history. He dabbled in Greek but did not make much progress. It worried him dreadfully that he of all people with his ideals should be without Italian. And yet there was so much to be done. The thought of how far short he was of the ideal he had set himself oppressed him. He consoled himself by buying a copy of *Il Pastor Fido* and wrote in it his name and underneath 'Qui ne le sait lire, qu'il est malheureux!' It was at once an affected and a pathetic gesture.

Watts' new friends at the Academy had the highest opinion of his artistic genius. And indeed he was getting on. He attended the Academy School only long enough to find out that he would learn nothing there. In 1837 he was able to hire a room in Clipstone Street for a studio. A few commissions were already coming in. He painted Roebuck the Radical and was asked by him to make a painting of the wax effigy which covered the bones of Jeremy Bentham. One evening coming back to the studio he was struck by the beauty of a bird in a poulterer's shop. He bought it and made a careful painting. As a sop to his romanticism he painted a falconer on horseback looking for his kill. This picture which he called *The Wounded Heron*, with two charming but unoriginal portraits, were sent to the Academy and were exhibited in 1837. It was the first step.

In the Spring of the same year he had been surprised at his work in the studio by Mr. Ionides, a Greek merchant. Ionides, who was something of an art patron, watched the young painter at work and asked him to copy a portrait of his father. The price was arranged at £10. A few months later a rather nervous Watts arrived with both pictures at the merchant's office. An art connoisseur happened by chance to be on the premises and he was asked which was the original. The poor young man, meantime, was standing nervously in the room. 'I cannot tell you that', the connoisseur replied slowly pointing to the Watts, 'but I can tell you which is by far the best painting of the two'.¹ Constantine Ionides was now sure of his man. He had felt at the studio that he was in the presence of a man who would go far. From that day he became Watts' best patron.

Commissions began to come in quite fast. He went into the country to paint and draw for a rich squire in Derbyshire. His sitters were becoming people of some little importance. There was an admiral, a well-to-do clergyman, the children of the Earl of Gainsborough. He was certainly getting on. It was not long before he was able to refuse invitations to dinner.

¹ M. S. Watts, p. 33.

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By this time Watts was an exceptional young man to know. His long curling black locks, his thin pale face with its expression of ambitious endeavour never failed to impress those he met. To them he seemed to be another Shelley, a poetic figure, frail in body, but whose earnest soul shone out through his large brown eyes. Though he was short he was extremely slim, and he gave the impression of being much younger than he was. This was a source of continual regret to him, but in some ways his youthfulness increased the poetic aura he cast around him. His clothes were unconventionally loose and artistic, and though they seemed to be put on anyhow, in reality he took great interest in his appearance. He had the makings of a dandy in him. Unsure as he yet was of his abilities, and made doubly so by those passionate visions which were the cause of and the compensation for his loneliness, he was almost morbidly aware of what people were thinking of him. He knew what was expected of him, and he played his part. It was not his fault but the fault of something which lay deeper than the will, that he was apt to over-act. A cynic might have said that he was a little too good to be true. No one could doubt that he could paint, but did he not behave a little too much like a painter?

1843 was a turning point in Watts' life. In that year Haydon's great dream of a competition for the decoration of the new Houses of Parliament took place. Only thus could English art become great, he considered. But although the idea was Haydon's the project was not due to his intervention with the government. Indeed by his rash letters to Ministers and to the papers he had been excluded from all participation in the work of the Fine Art Commission under whose auspices the competition was launched. This, despite the fact that Eastlake, his old pupil, was its chairman.

On June 1st, 1843, Haydon sent in his cartoon to Westminster Hall. When he arrived he found Eastlake walking about, who greeted him in a friendly way. "Do you remember" [Eastlake asked] "coming with me into Westminster Hall, and drawing a gigantic limb on the wall with the end of the umbrella, saying, 'This is the place for art' " ?" It was a great day for Haydon. 'Here we were', he recorded in his journal, 'master and pupil, marching about, and the first act of this great drama of art just beginning'.¹

Meanwhile Watts had also determined to enter the lists. For his drawing he chose Caractacus the British Chieftain being led in chains through Rome. But the picture did not go well. The method of sizing in those days was very clumsy. Haydon burnt his foot in the process, and Watts thought that he had ruined his design. Indeed so disappointed was he that he

¹ *Autobiography and memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by A. P. D. Penrose, London, 1927, p. 569.

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turned its face to the wall and abandoned it. But shortly before the last day for submission he took another look at it and decided that something might be done. He worked off as much of the error as possible and sent the cartoon in.

The opening of the Exhibition was fixed for the 3rd of July, but rumours began to circulate about the winners halfway through June. Watts was told that he was considered to have been successful, but at first refused to believe it. In July however the results were announced. The prizes of £300 went to Armitage for his *Landing of Julius Caesar*, to Watts for his *Caractacus*, and to Cope for his *First Trial by Jury*. Horsley obtained a £200 prize, and Severn, Keats' friend, £100. Haydon was not mentioned at all. It was all a great surprise to Watts. He expected to succeed in High Art, and his ambitions were the most exalted. But to succeed just where he thought he had failed! He was filled with great gusts of hope and enthusiasm. His struggles had not been in vain.

But he still had to undergo the ordeal of the critics who, captious as ever, felt that they would have awarded the prizes in a very different way. Armitage's cartoon on the whole was not admired. The subject was found to be wrong for one thing. For another Armitage had worked under Delaroche in Paris and it was considered a rebuff to British Art to give him the prize. 'The great mistake', Haydon wrote in his journal, 'the greatest mistake—and it has been a tremendous one—is the selection of a pupil of Delaroche's for the prize. The injury it will do is incalculable, for, instead of destroying the prejudices against British genius it will root them deeper than ever.'¹

The Athenaeum took much the same view, and having rated Armitage the critic passed on to Watts. 'Another of the £300 prizes, "Caractacus led in triumph through the streets of Rome", by Mr. Watts, is highly creditable to its exhibitor, but here again we must take exceptions against the subject. A British captive led in triumph to "make a Roman holiday"!—Would the Delaroches and the Delacroix's adorn their *Palais de Justice* with Napoleon dying under the eyes of English sentinels! . . . There was a moment in the history of the Ancient Briton which an artist had done well to select: we mean the chief's appearance before Claudius, when the captive by his inborn greatness, towered alike superior to his adversary and to his own fate. Here he is but a chained savage, led in humiliating procession by his victors. Standing before his design, we were struck by the number of claims laid on its several portions by the spectators: the main figure—a nobler breadth of brow admitted—will recall to many the "Ugolino" of Sir Joshua; while the son of Caractacus, and the woman

¹Haydon, p. 572.

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and child, on his right, have an amiable Raffaelesque grace, and the Trumpeter in the van, is borrowed from Annibal Carracci's "Triumph of Bacchus" in the Farnese palace, and was probably borrowed for the occasion from A. Mantegna. But these reminiscences show taste and reading, and as such, bind us over to respect and "good construction".¹

Haydon went down with his usual bravery to Westminster Hall. On the 27th of June Eastlake had let him know that his cartoon was not among those to be rewarded. It was a staggering blow although he had half expected it. The journal for July 1st runs: 'A day of great misery. I said to my dear love, "I am not included". Her expression was a study. She said, "We shall be ruined". I looked up my lectures, papers, and journals, and sent them to my dear Aeschylus Barrett, with 2 jars of oil (1816), 27 years old. I burnt loads of private letters, and prepared for executions. Lords Alfred and Northampton and William Hamilton took additional shares in "Saragossa". £7 was raised on my daughters' and Mary's dresses.'

'On Monday I went down to [Westminster Hall], and was astonished at the power displayed. There are cartoons equal to any school. My own looked grand, like the effusion of a master—soft and natural, but not hard and definite; too much shadow for fresco—fit for oil; but there were disproportions.'²

Haydon does not seem to have noticed Watts' cartoon, and indeed it must have cost him all his attention to appear calm. He knew that many eyes were watching to see how he took the disappointment.

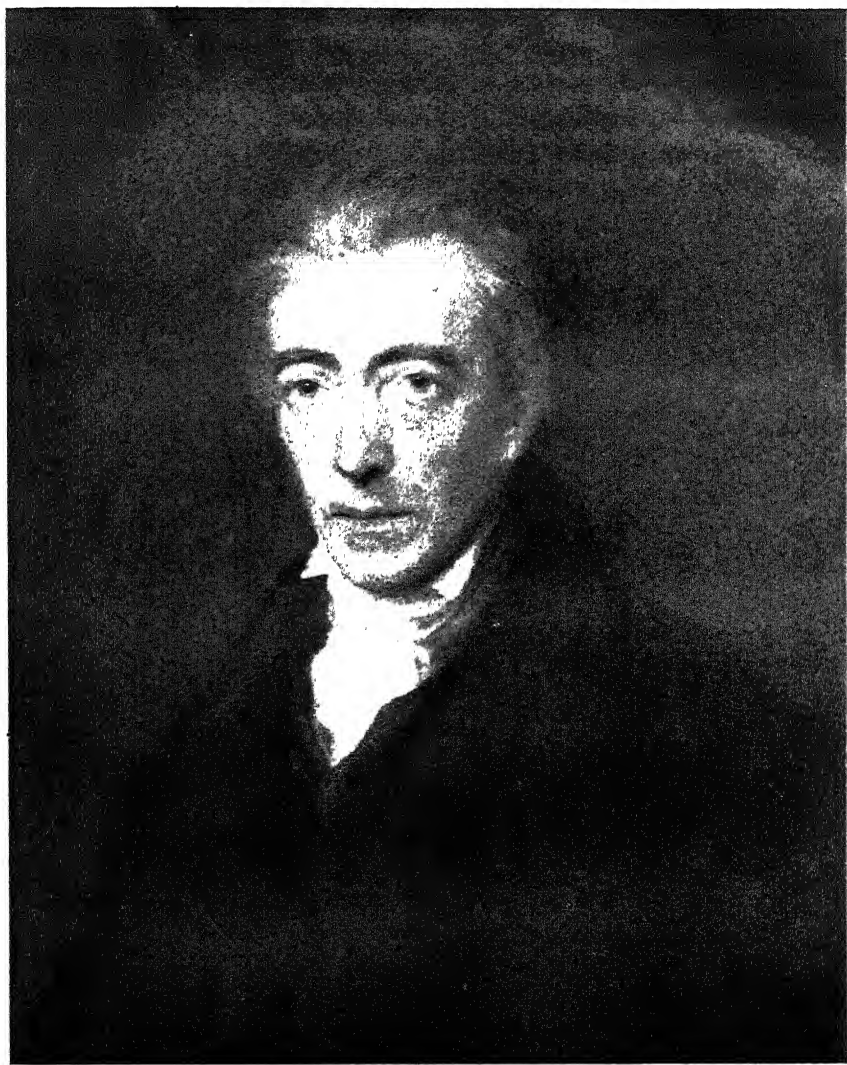
Another visitor to Westminster Hall, so the story goes, although he can only have been fifteen, was young Rossetti. Unlike Haydon he did notice Watts' *Caractacus* and with naive exaggeration he wrote to his mother: 'The artist is a young man by name Watts, who has been ever since he took to the arts, struggling with poverty. He is, however, as good as he is talented, and has been for many years the sole support of his mother.'³

The exhibition was attracting a great deal of attention. The placing of the scaffolding and the arrival of the pictures in Westminster Hall had been noted in *The Times*. There was indeed a reason unconnected with painting to keep the excitement alive. In October the newspapers were full of a murder which had taken place in Cobham Park near Gravesend. A surly young man had arrived at the local inn with his father. Having drunk together the two of them had gone for a walk. They had not returned next day. The father's body was discovered in an unfrequented part of the park dreadfully mutilated.

¹ *Athenaeum*, 1843, July 8th, p. 633.

² *Haydon*, pp. 571-2.

³ Mrs. Arthur Bell: *Representative painters of the Nineteenth Century*. London, 1899, pp. 18-19.



1. GEORGE WATTS, THE PAINTER'S FATHER.
1834-6



2. SELF-PORTRAIT AT THE AGE OF SEVENTEEN

1834

LONDON

The young man disappeared and day by day *The Times* gave news of the search. Enquiries were immediately set on foot and it became known that the young man was an artist called Richard Dadd. What was the excitement when it was discovered that he had entered a cartoon, *Saint George and the dead Dragon*, for the competition immediately before the murder! The girl whom Saint George had rescued in the picture was drawn from the painter's sister 'at his earnest request', as *The Times* put it. It was not stated whether the dragon represented the artist's father.¹

Even in far off Venice, Ruskin heard of the cartoons. He wrote to Severn pessimistically. 'With your hopes for the elevation of English art by means of fresco² I cannot sympathise. I have not the remotest hope of anything of the kind. . . . I see on our academy walls nothing but what is ignoble in small pictures and would be disgusting in large ones.'³

But for Watts, whether the critics were against him and the exhibition or not, the weeks following the announcement of his success were a time of fête. Wanostrocht assembled his Academy at Blackheath and the boys were given a whole holiday in the young painter's honour. For the first time in his life Watts had enough money in his pocket to indulge what had become his first ambition—to visit Italy. There was the land of the great masters, the land of High Art, the land from which no painter returned without being filled with a divine ambition to emulate the past. He would emulate the past, and he would paint gloriously for posterity.

¹ Richard Dadd, 1817–87, exhibited several times at the Academy. His work is of great interest and beauty. After his father's murder he escaped to France but was arrested in the act of trying to cut a fellow traveller's throat at Fontainebleau. He was placed in Bethlehem Hospital where he continued to paint, mostly in water colour. He died there at the age of 70.

² Following Watts' Victorian practice, 'fresco' is used in these pages in a more general sense than the word strictly should be used. Ruskin probably means 'mural painting' here.

³ S. Birkenhead, *Against Oblivion*, London, 1943, p. 169.

ITALY

This Lord Holland¹ was the son of the eccentric Lady Holland. He was a well dressed man in his forties with a lined intelligent face. His wife was a tiny neat woman with fine large eyes. Her long hair was parted in the middle and done up into a bun at the back. She had easy vivacious manners and spoke French and Italian more easily than English. The first meeting went well. To Lord Holland acquaintance with Watts was an interesting if not a very out of the way diversion. He was used to celebrities from England calling at the Casa Feroni. Certainly the young Watts was worth asking to luncheon again. And there the matter might have ended. But to Lady Holland it was something more. She had never managed to feel the self-confidence she considered her marriage demanded. Watts was a great opportunity. She had met men of genius before, but none of them had even remotely been of her making. But here was a young man whom she really could patronize. It would be of infinite use to the ambitious painter, and full of allurements for herself. Although she discovered by discreet enquiry that his father was tuning pianos, he had the air of a gentleman. Indeed on consideration the description of gentleman was beside the point. He had an intuitive knowledge of how to behave.

It was not long before the young man was painting Lady Holland's portrait. Drawn together by the picture which she felt in some way was half of her own making, the acquaintance ripened into friendship. Watts confided in her all his dreams, and she responded with the fresh pleasure of a child. She had read it all in his face as soon as she had set eyes on him. The sensitive face with its long black hair, the strained and sometimes rapturous expression, all pointed to what she had hoped. And now she had her genius painting her portrait!

Watts found her charming too. He had half dreaded, and half expected to meet a formal and alarming person who would look down on him and laugh at his aspirations, a social creature of the world. But when he found Lady Holland so naive, so pleased with him, and so understanding about his difficulties, he expanded like a flower in sunshine. As he looked at her sitting near the window in the room set aside for the studio, he felt delightfully attracted by her. He found she liked being ordered about in his domain. He would change her opinions about art, and by the very passion of his speech overcome any opinion she might tentatively oppose to his. They played cat and mouse in a flirtation of words. As the portrait went forward they became every session more intimate. She called him Fra Paolo because the portrait reminded her of a Veronese.

¹ Henry Edward Fox, fourth and last Lord Holland, b. 1802, married Mary Augusta Coventry, d. of George William, eighth Earl of Coventry by his second marriage. As Henry Fox he wrote an interesting journal between 1818-30.

ITALY

There was only one note of disapproval. Back in London Haydon heard of the portrait with contempt. 'That boy Watts', he wrote to Kirkup, the Florentine artist, 'I understand, is out, and went out, as the great student of the day. Though he came out for Art, for High Art, the first thing the English do is to employ him on *Portrait*! Lord Holland, I understand, has made him paint Lady Holland!! Is this not exquisite? Wherever they go, racing, cricket, trial by jury, fox-hunting, and portraits are the staple commodities first planted or thought of. Blessed be the name of John Bull!'¹

• Watts had already been asked to stay at the Casa Feroni while he was finding suitable accommodation. And little by little his stay prolonged itself until he almost became part of the household. It was a great and almost overwhelming change for him. He had been used to the back streets in London, and he had never had any real appreciation of his work. But now he was living in a hundred room house and being treated as a genius. Walking among the fountains in the evenings, listening to the night wind in the old pine, or gazing at the red dome of the San Spirito in the incredible blue of the Italian morning, he could scarcely believe that he was the same young man as the Watts of Clipstone Street who had stood with such perturbation in the office of Mr. Ionides the merchant.

In the evenings as they sat and looked out at the huge moon over the garden, Lady Holland would tell her little artless stories. There was one she was especially fond of.

'I went to Madame La Grange, and found with her the little aunt, Madame Joubert. . . . I had suspected that she would appear if only to decide the great question of the *feet*! So in my bag I had carefully put a little boot. I saw she was dying to be at the point at once, but the only man, Rambuteau, appeared and we went to dinner. Madame Joubert is a very clever little woman and moreover very amusing, as she seems to indulge in saying whatever comes into her head. . . . She is prettily made, and certainly knows how to *faire valoir* like a true Frenchwoman all her *avantages*. After dinner her impatience could no longer resist the important enquiry, and tho' I refused to *put my foot* in Rambuteau's hand as *umpire*, I presented the little boot, which I pretended to take off for the purpose.

'A bird of prey does not seize on his food', she would continue, 'with more eagerness than the little woman grasped at the boot. No woman had ever dared to dispute with success, no woman *sur le théâtre* with the reputation of a *foot* had ever come up to the smallness of hers. Saying which, her shoe was off, and compared with the boot seemed much the same size, or rather length. She tried to put it on—*impossible*. "Her coup-de-pied was

¹ B. R. Haydon, *Correspondence and Table Talk*, by F. W. Haydon, London, 1876, ii, p. 208.

ITALY

high"—"The boot was not well laced!" Any excuse, but it could not get on, and she was very glad that it should be decided that the two feet were much of a muchness. I held her shoe in my hand, and it is considerably wider than mine, and rather in Lady D. Stuart's line. I must say she is the woman whose foot most resembles mine in smallness, tho' it does not equal it quite. There were great expressions of surprise at my not making a *fuss* about it, wearing *shorter* petticoats, etc. Rambuteau said that at Paris, *that* one fact alone would make my fortune, so very much prized was it.¹

Less than a fortnight after his arrival Watts was at work on a figure of Flora in the courtyard. Flora, as seemed appropriate, was painted near a little fountain and it was thought by everybody to be very pretty. All Florence came flocking to see it. The Hollands were pronounced to be very lucky in having come across such a talented and yet such a modest young man. What astonished everyone was that the adulation and good living did not go to their protégé's head. He had been so poor that it seemed hardly natural that he should remain apparently so unaffected by the praise that was being lavished on him. Already he was familiarly known as 'the master'. And yet he sat modestly at the luncheon table without touching wine or the rich dishes, as if in some incomprehensible way he was carrying out ascetic exercises. It was the more extraordinary because cooking at the Casa Feroni was a high art. If the dish was cleared Lord Holland sent it down to the chef with a guinea in it.

Watts was thoroughly happy. He was in good health and the first flush of success. He loved meeting the distinguished visitors passing through Florence whom Lord Holland often persuaded to sit to him. In the intimacy of the studio he would get them to talk, and there was nothing like that for making them appreciate his intelligence. Sometimes he would get a little above himself to Lord Holland's amusement. One day a visitor described how music had no effect on him. 'What does that mean, I ask you?' 'It means a defective organisation', the young painter shouted hotly.²

Lord Holland was becoming interested in the young man. A fortnight after their first meeting he had written to his aunt: 'Mr. Watts seems to me full of genius and favourable ambition, without any of the jealous, niggling, detracting vanity of his brother artists. I have seen a good deal of him as he has made a beautiful sketch of Augusta in oil. I wish you would mention and recommend him to Lord Lansdowne. I think he will be a great painter in his day. . . .'³ He took pains to introduce him to the right

¹ *Chronicles of Holland House 1820-1900*, by the Earl of Ilchester, London, 1937, pp. 318, 9.

² M. S. Watts, i, p. 70. ³ Ilchester, p. 320.

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people. Francis Charteris, later the Earl of Wemyss, was one of the first of these. George Vivian, who was on the Committee of Taste in London, was another. Later on when he returned home Watts was to be supplied with introductions of every sort.

These were the happiest days of his life. For the first time he was making friends. There was Cottrell, the English Chamberlain to the Duke of Lucca. He was a frequent diner at the Casa Feroni. There was W. B. Spence, artist and wit. Then there was Seymour Kirkup, Haydon's friend, who had smuggled himself into the Bargello and copied Giotto's portrait of Dante before it had been restored. Hiram Powers was in Florence too, a hard headed American sculptor. Powers had made the clockwork mechanism for *Satan* and other monsters in the Chamber of Horrors at Forfeuille's Western Museum, Cincinnati. He had also made wax effigies of celebrities, and in this way discovered his aptitude for taking a likeness. About the time of Watts' arrival he had executed a marble figure of a nude girl which he called 'The Greek Slave'. The girl was supposed to represent a Turkish captive and as the Greek War of Independence was still a vivid memory, the statue was a great success. Mrs. Browning wrote a sonnet to 'the fair stone' calling upon her to:

*Strike and shame the strong
By thunders of white silence overthrown.*

Genial, confident and handsome, bearded and dogmatic, with his strange Swedenborgian religion and delight in praise of himself, Powers was a wonderful companion. Many an evening Watts would spend with these friends at the Café Doney, talking, sketching and joking.

At other times he would sit with those who were invited to the Casa Feroni, and at Lady Holland's command would take out his pencil and do a small portrait of one of them for her. In this way nearly all the guests who visited the Hollands were recorded. Lady Holland was in her element. She had never liked formal manners, and Watts became an attraction for the rather unconventional artists and lovers of art who were to be found in Florence but who would not normally be tempted to call on the British Minister.

But more formal amusements abounded. There were balls and dinners which Watts was laughed into attending. He was even persuaded into fancy dress, and afterwards finding a suit of armour lying about in his studio he painted himself as a knight with the Hollands' summer villa in the background. It was to this ball that Lady Holland went as a Quakeress, and to which Princess Mathilde de Demidoff, Jerome Bonaparte's daughter, came as Diane Chasseresse, in a daringly classical costume.

ITALY

'The beauty of her legs and ankles', Lord Holland wrote, 'accounted for, but did not, it seems, justify the costume.'¹

A more serious diversion was a wonderful expedition to Rome. Lord Holland was afraid that Watts' heated imagination would be disappointed with the Sistine Chapel, so he put off visiting it till the end. Watts, ever polite, was full of impatience. But the delay was rewarded for when they arrived the Chapel was flooded with beautiful light and could be seen as a whole, which does not often happen. His enthusiasm was infectious. The Hollands began to see the building as they had never seen it before.

Watts was tasting the fullness of life. He scrambled up Vesuvius with Lord Walpole and looked into the fiery crater. He stood in the ruins of Pompeii. And then on New Year's Day, as if to crown the carnival of his stay, Lady Holland threw a gold chain over his head and placed a gold watch of delicate workmanship in his hand. As she did so she said: 'We not only bind you to us, we chain you.'²

Lady Holland was not the only woman he fascinated; he became involved with a high-born Florentine woman of beauty and intelligence whom he had to visit every day to give a drawing lesson. It was not long before he realised that she had tender ambitions in his direction. At the time his affections were tied up elsewhere but he found it very hard to avoid the little intimacies in which she delighted. Eventually one day on his way to the Signorina he was presented with a pretty little bouquet of flowers in the street and without thinking presented it to her on his arrival. With a charming gesture and the sweetest of smiles she lovingly put the flowers into her bosom. Suddenly realising what he had done, Watts was puzzling how to extricate himself when he was saved by the appearance of visitors.

The next day, as one condemned to death, pale and nervous, Watts made his appearance at the woman's home. He found her alone in a gorgeous apartment, not the one he had been used to. They sat together by the fire trying to make conversation. As Watts talked nervously the climax of the situation was being reached. Then it came with a tempting look and gesture. Her eyes melting with tenderness, she drew the flowers from their resting place. The young man suddenly became courageous. He took them from her hand and flung them into the fire. And with that he turned tail and fled as hard as he could from the house.³

At the end of the year the Hollands took a villa outside Florence, at Careggi, in order to be able to move there when the weather was too hot at the Casa Feroni. The house they chose was the Villa Medicea. Here

¹ Ilchester, p. 337.

² M. S. Watts, i, p. 57.

³ From an unpublished draft of a letter to Tom Taylor.



3. MISS HOPKINS (MRS. MALLORIE)

1836



4. THE WOUNDED HERON

1837

ITALY

Lorenzo the Magnificent had been denied absolution on his deathbed by Savonarola, and in the courtyard Lorenzo's attendants threw the doctor who had failed to cure their master down the well. Watts set to work at a fresco of the doctor's murder. But at first it did not go well, and Lord Holland wrote to his mother to make enquiries as to the method employed at Bowood, Lord Lansdowne's house. 'Sometimes', he wrote, 'his labours dry quite spotty and bad, and sometimes tolerably well; but he is not able to discover what (unless it be the changes of the atmosphere) makes this variety.'¹ In July of the next year he wrote again: 'Watts' fresco is not quite so flourishing as at first. It does not dry equally, and he is somewhat dispirited about it. . . . He and Peters are now drawing from a model for the back of the ruffian who is throwing the Doctor into the well. Watts means to make a study for each picture.'²

A note of criticism, however, had begun before this to appear in Lord Holland's letters. 'I am very much interested about Mr. Watts', he wrote to his mother, 'I think he has not only great talent, but real genius. The artists here, who are all good judges and very parsimonious of praise, are wild about him, though very angry at having to acknowledge foreign merit. He is, however, terribly dilatory and indolent, and will not buckle to to study fresco painting as he ought. I have worried him into painting portraits, and he has two splendid ones of Jerome Bonaparte and his daughter, P^{ss} Demidoff, besides a full length one of Mrs. Fitzpatrick, which is extremely like, and yet will hand her down to posterity as very beautiful!!! He would not paint portraits at first . . . and indeed he has talent for really fine poetical pictures—but who in this age will order them and pay for them, among the few who have the sense to hang them up! !? I like him very much, and have seldom if ever known any artist so totally devoid of their usual faults of envy and detraction. He is very clever, well read, and wonderfully quick and intelligent; but I fear he has not the energy and qualities to ensure his prosperity in the world'.³

Watts managed to finish the fresco in May, but when he came down to the Casa Feroni Lord Holland found him 'more maundering than ever . . . see-sawing from one leg to the other'⁴ when he was busy at his diplomatic work. It was found difficult to get him to his studio at all. People began to say that the Hollands were spoiling the young man, and indeed he often appeared what had seemed impossible on his first arrival—vain and arrogant. Lord Holland complained that on a visit to France Watts would only sketch a dunghill. The painter said it was the best thing he had seen. All the time he had been in Florence he had refused to copy the old masters. He did indeed do some very nice water colours, but he would

¹ Ilchester, p. 324.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 324, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

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not sit down to oils. He said it would distort the individuality of his genius. He breakfasted with Powers and Kirkup at the café Doney, would saunter about and buy buttonholes from the flower woman on the square.

Lord Holland gave him endless commissions for portrait, but suddenly he took a violent fancy for landscape painting and nothing would induce him to return to his sitters. At times he would exasperate his host. For instance, having painted Sir Charles Bannerman, the father of Lord Holland's attaché, Watts refused to take any payment although he was greatly in need of money. 'I have scolded', Lord Holland wrote, 'and reasoned, and for the time kept him quiet, but he vows he shall return the money and will not paint portraits for gain. I think this foolish. However, I suspect he is just now in the fervor of historical painting, and will not be so unreasonable when the fit of glory and the visions of Michael Angelo shall subside a little.'¹

At length even Lady Holland felt that Watts' prolonged stay was doing him no good. He was no longer the young unsophisticated painter she had admired and idealised. 'He must work for his country', she wrote, 'for fame, riches and position. I hope our home, wherever it be, may be his home occasionally, under circumstances whenever he likes, but I have a strong and determined wish to break the spell, and make him feel that he is ever a welcome guest but not a constant and *necessary* inmate. I consider this *necessary* for all parties, becoming all parties, and I feel certain it will lead to the ultimate comfort of all parties. The world is ever cold and heartless in all its judgments; and I feel unfortunately a strong conviction that Watts' prolonged *séjour* in our house will not be ascribed to its real cause—good nature and kindness of heart on our side, want of energy, affection and gratitude on his. His idleness will be laid to our door; and we shall be accused of having been the ruin of him, lucky if both of us escape with even so mild a censure.'²

There may have been a little gossip, too, for Watts was an attractive young man and Lady Holland was not above being pleased at his flattery. It was probably known that he had some rather daring little sketches of her. But whether they were drawn from nature or from imagination is not revealed.

The Hollands left Florence at the end of 1845 and handed the villa at Careggi over to Lady Duff Gordon and her two daughters. Although the Hollands already thought it wise that Watts should bring his stay to an end, they did nothing in the matter themselves. Their plans were very unsettled and they did not in any case expect to continue long in Florence. So Watts was left at Careggi with Lady Duff Gordon to keep house.

¹ Ilchester, p. 338.

² Ibid., p. 336.

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Lady Duff Gordon¹ was a vigorous woman of the world with a wide amateur interest in the arts. Her husband had died in early middle age and she was now intent on the culture and education of her two daughters, Georgie and Alicia. The girls were learning music and art and poetry. What could be more conducive to such an education than the atmosphere at Careggi?

Lady Duff Gordon at once took to Watts. He was so cultured and refined. His manners were perfect and it did one good to listen to his passionate idealistic conversation. Besides, he obviously wanted nursing. How could Lady Holland have left him all alone in such a great house when he had no idea of looking after himself? Lady Duff Gordon was soon busying herself with the help of the girls in making him more comfortable. They arranged the rooms he was using and insisted that he should have a warm wood fire.

And then it was decided that the young man should give the Miss Gordons drawing lessons. A warm friendship soon developed. Georgie, who was vigorous and matter of fact, enjoyed arguing with her young master. At first she could not help seeing how much of what he said was outside the range of possibility. There did not go with the passionate talk of High Art a corresponding sense of reality. But little by little in the romantic surroundings at Careggi she allowed herself to succumb to his fascination. Everything seemed possible to him. And had not his success already been almost incredible? How he talked! It moved her like a magic draught.

Watts was using an enormous building which housed lemon trees in the winter for his studio and Georgie would often visit him there to see whether he wanted anything. Then an argument about art, religion or liberalism would start. Where he was liberal she was conservative, where he was religiously vague or agnostic she was dogmatic. It was more a means of getting to know Watts than a way of arriving at the truth. Her world was very settled and Watts' revolutionary theories did nothing to threaten it.

They were very much together. Watching him as he argued, being close to him as he bent over her drawing board, she gave way as much as she dared to the exciting feelings the young painter aroused in her. In the evenings there were duets and walks in the cool darkening gardens among the fountains. Watts had a guitar, and they would sing together. He even made up verses for a love song.

If Georgie almost allowed herself to love Watts, Watts almost let him-

¹ Caroline, daughter of Sir George Cornwall, Bt., married (1810) Sir William Duff Gordon 2nd Bt. (1772-1823).

ITALY

self go too. Georgie's keen common sense and humour filled him with admiration and happiness. He delighted to soar too high in his speculations for the thrill of being brought to earth by her realism. And he saw clearly that she was not unmoved by him.

And yet Watts had another mistress whom he had fallen head over heels in love with a long time back. Art was his first love, and demanded its tribute of affection. This love for Georgie was strong, but was it more than an enthusiasm, a gulp of wine dashed down and forgotten? He loved playing the lover rather than loving. But little by little he began to think how well Georgie and he were suited. As with all idealists he had his sordidly realistic moments. What a good companion she was, and would not her practical sense supply just what he lacked? They might marry. His thoughts hardly carried him so far, but more and more the possibility seemed about to present itself.

Georgie felt his fascination growing upon her. She felt it all too strongly. But these feelings, she decided in her practical way, were snares. Watts might cast a spell upon her but she would not allow her head to be completely turned. In a moment of weakness she told him that she wished there was not so much difference between them. That was as much as she allowed herself. Birth, education, outlook were all against them.

Lady Duff Gordon was watching the affair closely. Much as she liked Watts and admired his genius she saw that any idea of marriage was out of the question. Baronet's daughter weds drawing master! It was the theme of any novelette. Before matters came to a crisis she quietly withdrew to Rome where she hoped better society and new interests would cure her daughter's infatuation, if indeed it was an infatuation.

It was not a very sad farewell. Watts probably did not realise how the affair was being manipulated. It was only later that he realised that it was over. What Georgie felt we do not know. It may have been that she dismissed Watts from her with a heavy heart. If only she could have felt he had not dazzled her.

When the Duff Gordons had gone Watts became restive. He wandered round the gardens, disturbed and frustrated. Left alone he was assailed by a host of worrying elusive thoughts. Perhaps he half realised that Georgie had had to go to save herself. He consoled himself by writing to her. He told her of his artistic plans, of his hopes, and here and there of his regret.

'How goes the music? do you ever sing any of our old duetts? I tried the other day the German Duett with a Lady, but although she sang it as well as possible it was quite another thing, and I could not but feel how wonderfully well our voices must have suited each other. I have not touched the clay since your departure.



5. DETAIL FROM CARACTACUS CARTOON



6. LADY HOLLAND

1843 •

ITALY

'My guitar is consigned to its case and my music is covered with dust. Excepting upon the occasion above mentioned I have not attempted to sing a note. One does nothing alone . . .'¹

He paid Lady Duff Gordon a fleeting visit to Rome and, so far as is known, did not see Georgie again, though they corresponded for some time. To quell his unhappiness he turned to his painting and worked at it with almost fanatical devotion.

Meanwhile Watts was not missing any opportunities for furthering his success in the world. A new venture in a public competition seemed likely to bear fruit. There had already been two competitions since the one in which he had entered the *Caractacus*. And his friends, including the Hollands, pressed him to make another attempt, for in June, 1847, a prize was to be offered for an oil painting to decorate the House of Lords. After some delay Watts consented and rapidly painted a huge composition, 'Alfred inciting the Saxons to resist the landing of the Danes by encountering them at sea'.

The last day for the competitors was in June. On April 15th Watts started from Leghorn taking with him five enormous canvases. He had spent a week in Rome before his departure, no doubt with the Duff Gordons, and as soon as he was on board ship he wrote a farewell letter to Georgie. In a few months after the competition he meant to be back at Careggi. He felt he could never leave the beauty of Italy behind. In Italy he had found himself. There he had discovered that the dreams of a lonely London boy can come true.

Nevertheless with a sense of foreboding he wrote: 'The boat is steaming away in the harbour, my place is taken, and in a short time my back will be turned upon my beloved Italy. I grieve to leave it, particularly at this moment, when it is beginning to put on all its charms. Careggi was looking beautiful. Poor Careggi, I may never see it again! Though it is my intention to return, if possible, immediately; I am too well aware of the accidents to which the future is subject to count upon anything.'² He was not destined to return to Italy for many weary years. He did not know it, but the carnival had gone out of his life.

¹ From the collection of letters at the Watts Gallery, Compton. These are typewritten copies made by Mrs. G. F. Watts.

² Ibid.

III

LONDON AGAIN

[i]

Watts returned to England with a considerable reputation among connoisseurs. From now on he was no longer treated with the kindness or the scorn that is bestowed on the newcomer. He was more severely judged and more lavishly praised. Even his friends felt that he was fairly launched, and could be left to his own devices. The Hollands had decided that a little struggling would do him no harm; they felt it would harden his character which had been weakened by the easy days in Florence. Poor Watts! He had forebodings of the fight before him, but lost in the airy ambitious regions of his mind, he failed to gauge the reality of his situation. He thought he could behave in London as he had behaved in Florence. He was not prepared for a humiliating lack of sympathy.

At first things went well enough. The *Alfred* was placed in Westminster Hall, and this time it was no surprise for him to learn that he had won one of the first prizes. Others to gain the £500 premiums were Pickersgill for his *Burial of Harold* and Armitage for his *Battle of Meeanee*. On the whole the exhibition was found to be disappointing. The critic of the *Athenaeum* who, it is true, was apt to be sour on occasions, found some of the pictures 'scarcely eligible for elevation on sign-posts'.¹ Severn submitted an *Allegorical Portrait of Her Majesty Queen Victoria as Victory*. 'This painter', said the *Athenaeum*, 'would seem to consider the British Oak as the home of victory—from the peculiar action of the principal figure; who looks as if she had been climbing and were now perilously descending its branches. . . . In its likeness of the Queen the picture is not happy.'² Armitage, whom the *Athenaeum* had never taken to from his French upbringing, was curtly dismissed in a short paragraph. 'To have invented and filled so large a canvas with details is itself an art—but not of the high class demanded by the Commissioners for a first class prize.'

Watts fared better, but he cannot have felt that the critic was sympathetic. 'In Mr. Watts's largest composition "Alfred Inciting the Saxons to prevent the Landing of the Danes by encountering them at Sea", the artist has been less intent on the illustration of the particular incident than on applying to it a treatment after the manner of the Florentine and Roman

¹ *Athenaeum*, 1847, pp. 735, 736.

² *Ibid.*, p. 736.

LONDON AGAIN

Schools. That Mr. Watts's talents are of a high order this production and his cartoon of 1843 both show, but without proper direction these talents—oscillating between diverse schools and masters, the severer Florentine and the ornate Venetian—will lay no hold on the sympathies or hearts of beholders. Mr. Watts may please the learned in Art by his careful readings and high estimate of great authorities—but will not found a sound reputation while he allows himself to deal only in the dead letter. This composition, though, as we have said, more a manifestation of the resources of the painter than an illustration of the text, is full of fine passages of drawing and colour and of vigour and severity in style: yet rendered so entirely in the manner peculiar to a time when the manipulation of Art was almost confined to the practice of fresco, and comprehending in its arrangement so much of what was felt by the practitioners themselves to be among the *disadvantages* of that practice, as to thwart the effect of his own intelligent powers. That the painter may have been led into the adoption of this peculiar treatment from the fact of fresco pictures being wanted for the new Houses—and with a view to produce, by oil painting in some volatile vehicle, a surface that should, like fresco, enable the picture to be seen from many points of view, while, from the more tractable nature of the material, less mechanical difficulties would have to be encountered—can be understood. But it would be a matter of regret if such a notion should be permitted to disturb the healthy and original direction of powers which, properly used, are calculated to acquire distinction for Mr. Watts, and do honour to his country.¹ Watts must have found it difficult to decide whether to be contented at the criticism or not. What was given with the one hand was withdrawn by the other.

Rossetti, who had liked Watts' previous entry very well, found the *Alfred* 'truculent', as he wrote to Woolner, his sculptor friend, some years later.² Of the younger men Millais was noticed: 'If the author of the Widow's Mite, Mr. J. Everett Mallair [*sic*]³—a very young artist, we understand—be not spoilt by the over-praise of those about him, there is enough in his picture to show that with proper training he will finally deserve all which they now claim for him. That word "genius"—which we have heard used with reference to him—is one which has not to this day had its significance definitely settled—at least in Art.'³ But neither the *Alfred* nor the exhibition managed to arouse much interest.

If the glory of winning the £500 was less than he had hoped, Watts did have the pleasant task of writing a magnanimous letter to the Treasury offering the *Alfred* to the nation at a low price. But as the Fine Art Com-

¹ *Athenaeum*, 1847, p. 705.

² Thomas Woolner, *Life in Letters*, London, 1917, p. 49.

³ *Athenaeum*, 1847, p. 766.

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missioners had already decided to buy the picture and had fixed the price, Watts only made himself slightly ridiculous. By his scrupulosity over money he was reduced to pleading that he should not be properly recompensed for his toil, while the Commissioners had to be firm about keeping to a fair price. His good manners were making him almost as unpopular with government officials as Haydon's lack of them had done.

[ii]

Watts' ambition was getting the better of him. He was dreaming of a 'House of Life', as he called it. It was a magnificent chimerical project—a project that might, it is true, have been realised, but which never in fact was brought down to practical dimensions. The idea was to get possession of a gigantic hall and to decorate it as a cathedral of beauty and ennoblement. The hall was to be the Sistine Chapel of the nineteenth century.

It was Watts' delight to sketch out the plan on paper. 'The ceiling to be covered with the uniform blue of space, on which should be painted the Sun, the Earth, and the Moon, as it is by their several revolutions and dependence upon each other that we have a distinct notion of, and are able to measure and estimate, the magnitude of Time. The progress of Time, and its consequent effect, I would illustrate for the purpose of conveying a moral lesson—the design of "Time and Oblivion"¹ would be exactly in its place. To complete the design, the Earth should be attended by two figures symbolic of the antagonistic forces, Attraction and Repulsion. I would then give, perhaps upon one half of the ceiling, which might be divided with a gold band on which the zodiac might be painted, a nearer view of the earth, and by a number of gigantic figures stretched out at full length represent a range of mountains typifying the rocky structure or skeleton. These I would make very grand and impressive, in order to emphasise the insignificance of man. The most important (to us) of the constellations should shine out of the deep ultramarine firmament. Silence and Mighty Repose should be stamped upon the character and disposition of the giants; and revolving centuries and cycles should glide, personified by female figures of great beauty, beneath the crags upon which the mighty forms should lie, to indicate (as compared with the effect upon man and his works) the non-effect of time upon them.

'Then I would begin with man himself, trace him through his moral and political life; first the hunter stage, gaining, through the medium of his glimmering yet superior intelligence, advantages over the stronger yet in-

¹ One of his first allegories admired for a time by Ruskin. It was painted soon after Watts' return from Italy.

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ferior animals, almost his equals. Next the pastoral state, his intelligence further developed to the consequent improvement of his condition: serviceable animals domesticated, reclaimed by his thoughtful care, the stronger and finer subdued by the force of his will, aided by all-conquering intelligence. This is the Golden Age, the age of poetry. Of experience comes tradition, of tradition is born poetry, here performing its natural and legitimate function—instructing. This portion of the work might be rendered most beautifully, since in this period of the history of society it is possible that the human animal enjoyed the greatest possible amount of happiness, equally removed from the penalties of ambition, and from the degradation of a precarious and merely animal existence. There would be a great chance of exquisite subjects to illustrate this epoch, and here might be introduced the episode of Job.

‘Next should be man—the tyrant—the insidious oppressor—the slave, a dweller in cities—the Egyptians raise the pyramids—their mythology—the habits of the people.’¹

The scheme ‘was to end in a pageant of the progress of civilisation, through Palestine, Assyria, Persia, India, Greece, Rome, each with their mythology and their representative men; the dawning of the Christian era; the fall of Jerusalem; the history of the Middle Ages in Europe; the rise of the Saracen power; the preaching of Peter the Hermit.’² But as the scheme developed it became more abstract, until it turned into a history of the progress of man’s spirit.

It was an ambitious project indeed. Fired by the Sistine Chapel, Watts was dreaming of becoming England’s Michelangelo. But it was not to be. He was still comparatively unknown to the general public, and the vagueness of his ideas on the matter must have put off anyone he may have approached. How many halls would the scheme have filled? And how was Watts to support himself while at work unless he was given a regular salary for many years as well as the building and painting materials? The dreamer had quite overreached himself, and now was to begin the painful process of withdrawing his horns. Living in the sympathetic world of English aristocrats wintering in Italy Watts had forgotten the hard realities of London life. There was now no Casa Feroni or Careggi where he was known as ‘the Master’. He had, indeed, forgotten his father’s bitter struggle and failure.

[iii]

Not only did the House of Life come to nothing, but even Watts’ ambition of decorating public buildings in fresco was not destined to be ful-

¹ M. S. Watts, i, pp. 101–103.

² *Ibid.*, i, p. 104.

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filled. It was the disappointment of his life. The School of English historical painters which seemed to be coming into being under the patronage of the Prince Consort, in which Watts would have found his place, never in fact was formed. The men, such as Stevens and Tenniel, the future cartoonist, who would have composed it, through the stupidity of officials were forced to use their talents in other directions. The commissions for the most part were given to painters of an earlier manner, like Maclise, Dickens' friend, incapable of understanding mural art. Nevertheless the one mature fresco Watts did complete at Lincoln's Inn is far from successful. He does not seem properly to have understood the medium, for the colour has not lasted and the composition is not well grouped. Judging by this it is safe to say that Watts would never have fully succeeded as a fresco painter.

The realisation that his ideals were not possible of achievement was the crisis of his career. The fact that circumstances did not allow him to develop as he expected and wished to do explains the underlying frustration and disappointment in even his most ambitious undertakings. It perhaps also explains why he never escaped the accusation of being a private dreamer and pasticheur. Unsure of his position, without the great psychological benefit of feeling a school behind him, without the opportunity of discussion with men of similar aim, it was not extraordinary that he should be forced in upon himself, and should try to give expression to diverse traditions of painting which were not always well suited to each other. From now onwards the straightforward vigour of his oil painting previously influenced by fresco technique begins to disappear. He seems to be trying, without hope, to find the tradition to which he belongs. The sharpness and swiftness of his early work is slowly discarded for what is at its worst blurred, worried and hesitating.

Watts was depressed and lacking in confidence. It was as if a new cycle of his life had begun, another movement played in a slower and sadder key. The worst of it was that he had no one on whom he could rely for true sympathy. Even the Hollands were growing tired of him. Yet he needed sympathetic encouragement now more than at any other moment of his life. He was tasting the bitter disillusion that his Italian success brought with it. When he was a poor lad in London he had thought that he had only to do well once and he would get on. Haydon, Severn and how many more, had made the same mistake. He realised now that success demanded a continual effort to keep to the standard to which he had raised himself. If he did not struggle he would be forgotten and sink.

And certainly for a time it did look as if he really might sink. The critics were almost venomously hostile. 'Mr. G. F. Watts', wrote the

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Athenaeum critic of the Academy in 1848, 'Mr. G. F. Watts—one of the successful cartoonists of Westminster Hall—is not successful in either of the two portraits which he has here. Lady Holland is as little remarkable as an example of feminine individuality as is the portrait of the ex-minister M. Guizot as a likeness of the man. Such works will not maintain the painter or justify the notice assigned to the artist elsewhere.'¹

Nevertheless, despite the unkindness of the *Athenaeum* critic, it was obvious that he must turn to portraiture or starve. His friends were beginning to lose patience with his dawdling poeticism, which seemed to advance him not at all. But Watts was as obstinately opposed to portraiture as Barry and Haydon had been. He felt it degraded him. It was commercial, low and unpoetical.

When Georgie Duff Gordon in her practical womanly way wrote for a price list of portraits he replied 'The list you ask for has never been made out, or indeed considered, and when the subject comes up I feel inclined to say, if anyone wants a lover, or a mother, a sister, or a brother painted, let him come to me, and I shall be more than paid by the pleasure it will give me to do something towards adding to the general stock of happiness.' The young lady must have sadly shaken her head at this, but the next paragraph was more hopeful:

'So now to open my shop and ticket the articles—"Anything else today ma'am, a very superior thing, warranted fast colour."

'In spite of my good intentions I cannot really set up the portrait painter and have a regular list of sizes and prices to match—I mean I cannot go through the whole list, I do not mind painting a *third*, because it ought to be always good study, and as I should like to take great pains, I think 40 guineas will not be an unreasonable price: for a kit-kat. I will say 50 guineas for sizes above that. I have had 100 guineas and consequently I cannot say less as I told you formerly—so I must say 100 for a Bishop half length (there are intermediate sizes which I must leave out, as the price must be the same). For a whole length I must say 120—I feel almost too much of a shopkeeper to say most sincerely yrs. G. F. W.'²

It was a hard thing, this business of money. He despised it as much as his predecessors in High Art had done, and his disparaging comments about it, springing as much from a desire not to place himself beneath his sitters as from true generosity, led to all sorts of complications. He would not lower himself to such considerations, his letters to clients would begin, then after all, as he had to in order to live, he would finally state

¹ *Athenaeum*, 1848, p. 536.

² Compton collection of letters. Most are not dated. They range from October, 1847, to December, 1848.

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the price. All this in so obscure a style and so tortured with indecision that the perplexed client often sent a cheque for the wrong amount. He never managed to reconcile his strong belief that money was the root of all evil with his equally strong experience that money was a necessity without which one would starve. In the end he compromised. After all, allegories could be a hobby while portraiture and nobility might be reconciled.

‘What would you think’, he wrote to Georgie Duff Gordon, ‘if I have made up my mind to paint all sorts of portraits! The fact is I am beginning to look upon myself as a monster of selfishness. Objects of distress that have come under my observation during the last two or three days have induced me to reflect seriously that I have no right to throw away any means of being useful. No-one has a right to censure me for not being ambitious of a trifling distinction or for not desiring to acquire wealth, but neglecting opportunities of assisting the unfortunate is nothing less than gross selfishness on my part. The cold that nips me up makes me feel for others. I think every poor shivering wretch I meet has a right to revile me for wanting charity. I have promised myself to atone for my misdeeds by trying to do a little good in my generation. Today I saw a poor woman whose appearance evidenced better days applying for relief at the Workhouse (w^h was refused). £20 would have gone far to have set up the poor trembling brokenhearted creature, w^h £20 I might easily have had in my power to give her, but beast that I am, I hadn’t six pence. I am ashamed of myself when I think that I spend my time in unprofitable admiration of what is good, and make no effort to emulate what I admire. So this winter I will paint portraits in order to purchase the luxury of bestowing. I will refuse *nothing*. Pray do me the kindly office of reminding me occasionally of my good intentions and if you can put any heads in my way do, and I’ll turn them into coals and comforts for poor Devils whose misery seriously speaking I think of with much pain.’

‘I am not likely to waver in my resolutions’, he wrote in his next letter to Georgie and Alicia, ‘where they are once made and therefore I am still as anxious to put my projects into execution. I see clearly that indifferent historical pictures are not likely to improve mankind or benefit individuals while hard cash honestly obtained may be decidedly useful, and so for the future I shall be willing to paint Portraits—but I would not have you deceive yourselves; do not imagine that I have arrived at this conclusion from the exertion of reason or good feeling. It is that my want of interest and object has extinguished all my ambition, so that nothing is left but to make myself useful if possible.’

But he was able to find a better compromise still. His friends suggested that since he had had to abandon his House of Life he should build in-

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stead a House of Fame. In fact he should paint portraits of eminent men as a record for posterity. No doubt Lord Holland was at the bottom of the idea, for he promised to introduce Watts to all the celebrated figures of the day. It appealed to Watts' sense of mission and his patriotism. Portraiture of this kind he felt to be very far from degrading. Moreover, there was a vague hope that all the pictures should one day be housed together.

It was a sensible scheme and, bitter though the knowledge would have been to Watts, his fame largely depends upon it. For as a portrait painter of the mid and latter nineteenth century he is unrivalled. He brought to the portrait the poetry that he had hoped to lavish on his House of Life. Thus, whereas many of his contemporaries were busily painting photographs, his portraits have grandeur and dignity.

It has been said that Watts ennobled his sitters too much, and even Chesterton, who was an admirer, thought the portrait of Manning too like a church and too little like the man. But one must remember the purpose for which these portraits were painted. One has to imagine Watts girding himself with the mantle of poetry. These sensitive autumnal faces, haggard with the strife that racked the Victorian age, were to be housed in a Palace of Fame. A Millais may be hung in the dining-room, but a Watts needs at the least a College Hall.

The high aim that Watts brought to the portrait explains, not only his achievements, but his numerous failures as well. Like Haydon his imagination refused to kindle unless his sitter was great and noble. Beauty was not enough, as almost all his portraits of women clearly show. But when he had a woman who inspired him he could make of her as much as he could of a man. Florence Nightingale was a success; Lily Langtry and Mrs. Percy Wyndham were failures. In the same way the name of Gladstone or Tennyson, Arnold or Mill was enough; when he came to paint the Prince of Wales the pictures had to be abandoned in despair. The fat superficial face was ridiculously out of place in a world of nobility and high thought. It grieved Watts, but the Prince found no niche in his House of Fame.

[iv]

Soon after his return home and when he felt settled enough, Watts took a studio in Charles Street. A studio below was given over to Charles Couzens, an old friend, who was a miniature painter and copyist. Here Watts gathered round him an interesting set of acquaintances. Despite the humiliating lack of recognition, he must have seemed nevertheless a person worth knowing with his striking appearance and the Italian success to his credit. And where should one have looked in 1848 for the English art of

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the future save in the studios of the young men who had successfully competed for the Cartoon competitions? It could not have been foreseen that the Historical School would come to nothing. P. R. B. was still a secret hieroglyph.

Among these acquaintances was Aubrey de Vere, a well-to-do young poet from Ireland who, like Watts, was in the throes of putting his life in order. But, unlike Watts, he was turning to that most final and rational of solutions—the Catholic Church. Watts may have been tempted to follow him, but whereas he could appreciate the colourful aspect, he vehemently rejected the dogmatic. God, life, the soul, seemed things too wonderful, too complicated to be coldly defined in logical terms. De Vere would pace up and down the studio wrestling with Newman and Anglican orders as Watts painted at his easel.

It was a time for coming to grips with oneself, for the world outside the studio was anything but settled. The poor starving wretches Watts had noticed in his letter to Georgie Duff Gordon were a common sight in the streets of London and the great potato famine was devastating Ireland. De Vere took him over to his country house near Cork; and on his return Watts painted a huge sombre picture which he called *The Irish Famine*. It is an enormous composition and in a romantic way it is a success. If it was not his finest work, nevertheless it was a magnificent piece of propaganda.

Another friend, who was to have considerably more influence, was Tom Taylor. He had married a very forceful and kind-hearted woman who cosseted Watts, along with other struggling artists, poets and actors, at their comfortable bourgeois home at Lavender Sweep, Wandsworth. Tom Taylor, who came from the North of England where he had won scholarships, was a man of enormous energy. He was a Fellow of Trinity, Cambridge, barrister of the Inner Temple, and professor of English Literature at London University. He was later on to be editor of *Punch*. Besides all these activities he somehow found time to write numerous articles and books. But his chief interest was the drama. He was dramatic critic of *The Times*, and wrote many plays himself. Most of these were adapted from the French and are said to display a singular lack of good sense. He even produced a *Hamlet* in which the play was enlivened by a jester who struck the prince with a bludgeon.¹

Taylor was a short little man with small lensed spectacles. Rather like Mr. Pickwick his eyes would gleam kindly from behind them at the guests seated at his hospitable table. He still wore breeches and a long coat of velvet and continued to do so long after they had gone out of fashion. Taylor knew everybody, was kind to everybody who needed help, and

¹ On the other hand *Still waters run deep*, which was broadcast in 1944, was very effective.

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Lavender Sweep became a pleasant bourgeois refuge for artists in difficulties or actresses in need of advice. Fierce downright Laura, as everybody called Mrs. Taylor, ruled the house like a despot but visitors soon began to love her for her warmth of heart as much as they loved her husband for the warmth of his. The only people who seem not to have altogether loved Tom Taylor were his colleagues on *Punch*, for he had a habit of altering contributions to suit his own taste in humour.

Taylor was for ever introducing Watts to people who might interest him and might like to be painted. He also gave Watts his first literary commission. On the suicide of Haydon, Taylor, somehow or other, was entrusted with the task of editing his autobiography and diaries. Without a glimmer of understanding of High Art or the unfortunate painter he did the work well enough save for the interpolation of harsh moral comments. From the comfort of Lavender Sweep it was easy enough to be quick with one's bills! He did, however, have some trepidations over the art side of the book, and Watts wrote a short appendix which was later expanded.¹

But, despite the kindness of friends, Watts was sinking into despair. He tried to give concrete form to his disillusion in a picture called *Life's Illusions*. It was a very large canvas in the manner of Etty, of a knight on horseback pursuing the bubble of fame over a precipice. It seemed to Watts that he had followed the bubble and found it worthless. But a mocking visitor to his studio might have remarked that the picture itself refuted this view of the painter's career. For if indeed no ideal was worth the pursuit then there was no point in painting pictures—especially large ones with poetic subjects. And indeed Watts was destined to ride like his restless knight in the picture through illness, hope and disappointment after his dreams.

Certainly the reception it got from the critics seemed to justify Watts' disillusion. 'The conditions under which Mr. Watts may have dreamt his dream of *Life's Illusions*', the *Athenaeum* wrote contemptuously, 'it enters not into our nature to divine. While no standard of mere utility can be applied to the consideration of Art manifestation—yet the standard of rationality as it should be the principle of the painter's conduct, so it must be that by which the value of his labours is to be tested. Mr. Watts' *Illusions* will bear no such application. His picture can be acknowledged only as a clever combination of hues employed on masses which define no forms either in themselves specifically correct or subserving to the elucidation of any incident. The work is on a large and ambitious scale: full of passages of good colour, and having some light and shade—"signifying nothing".'²

¹ See Appendix II.

² *Athenaeum*, 1849, p. 520.

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[v]

Soon after his return he had written in a jocular way to Georgie Duff Gordon: 'Has the cold air of the North covered your good nature with a moral goose-skin and shrivelled up the Phidian proportion of your benevolence? Such may be the case for the winter advances "no end", and who can be just or generous when pulled by the nose, clawed down the back by the hoary old Hiems. Already he is meddling with my toes and I feel perfectly illiberal half-way up my legs... I feel the impossibility of doing anything in this rigorous climate, and here I am kept like a caged eagle, or if you think that too magnificent, like a cock-sparrow with a yard of thread tied to his leg, always thinking I can take flight and always being twitched back.'

'You will scarcely have escaped, I am afraid,' he wrote later more unhappily, 'the gloomy influence of the present depressing state of things, it is a sort of reign of sorrow and distress in general and the alarm is universal. . . . Alas for the days of Phidias and Raphael! I have not heard a stave of music since you went away. I begin to lose all perception and idea of harmony.' And a week later, 'I am not doing anything "beautiful" nor indeed anything at all but indulging my natural indolence and growing melancholy under the depressing influence of the climate.'

Georgie Duff Gordon tried to help him, but she was not very successful except in so far as she was a friend in whom he could confide. In her eyes the trouble lay in his highly romantic outlook. Answering a letter of hers he wrote: 'I thank you for your Homily. You come out with great effect in the preaching line. No doubt you are quite right in accusing me of a morbid state of feeling but wrong in imputing it to the effect of living in an atmosphere of enchantment. I wish I could find one, but the world has been my study and I have discovered that the prizes it offers for competition are not worth contending for. However as you truly observe this is a foolish song to sing, and one that will not meet with sympathy.'

It was a hard and cold letter. He felt like being unkind. In a postscript he added: 'If you will promise to look out for, and if possible find me a wife, I will promise while I am abroad to work hard, upon my honour I am serious. I must have something to look forward to. You talk of Fame! I am no longer to be taken in by such a pretence, but an agreeable companion in Italy would be an object worth working for.'

'I take a commercial and common-sense view of the subject and therefore should not risk being deceived or disappointed and if I myself felt no violent love at least I am incapable of betraying a trust. You are probably somewhat surprised at such apparently new ideas in me, but they are not new, I have long thrown my romance to the wind.'

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His next letter was more explicit. '*Entre nous*, I am disgusted and tired with the sort of life I have been living and it is late for me to commence a new career. I find that I have been much mistaken, in the romance of boyhood and youth. The generous sentiments incidental to those ages sufficed to fill the measure of my existence, but now that experience has shown me that the world is not quite what the poetry of youth represented it, and reflection and judgment have convinced me that it will never be in my power to improve it, my ambition is at an end; and my occupation is without an object and consequently without interest. Could I begin again it should be with a very different *but*. I would (not neglecting the higher walks of my profession) seek to make money in the hope of some day sharing it with some amiable companion, whose society would give a charm to my life and whose happiness and welfare would form a real and tangible object for my exertions, and I would exert myself, for I am not by nature unjust. Every day I feel more and more the impossibility of living alone. I am becoming subject to frightful fits of melancholy and despondency. But there is no reason why I should bore you with my absurdity excepting that I have always looked upon you, may I say as a sister? And really with very great affection, which after all is not a thing to be despised from anybody. I could find it in my heart to wish you were an ill-used or overworked governess. Remember you once wished me raised! So you have no right to be angry.

'... Of course all my complainings are *entre-nous*. Can't you give me some sapient advice? For I often think very seriously of Prussic acid! which is hardly a state of things my friends would approve of.'

But the affair had been closed once and for all. After a time Georgie wrote back in a way that hurt him. She must have pointed out how different were their outlooks. When he was successful it was easy enough to laugh off his love, but to have it rebuffed in a letter when he was in distress was another matter. He did the only thing he could to avoid a breach, which was to put the affair in an abstract and impersonal light.

'My dear Miss Gordon', he wrote evasively in his obscure style, 'all the letters sent to me have duly come to hand, and I am sure you will easily believe that I am not indifferent to the many kind expressions of friendship and regret they contain. . . .

'For many years my life has been passed in schooling myself, it has been my constant endeavour to see everything in its true light justly and impartially. I have thought myself justified in thinking for myself, and when I have erred and arrived at false conclusions it has neither been from wilfulness, nor from carelessness, but in asserting my right to think for myself, I never thought I had a right to influence the opinion of others, and it has

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always been one of my strictest self-imposed rules never to intrude unformed and probably erroneous ideas and opinions. . . . I think I may safely say that much as we have been together no opinion or views in which you have been educated have been shocked by me. If it has been otherwise, pray forgive me. . . . With respect to my . . . uncertain resolutions much might be said—I am not a happy man—I adore beautiful nature, I love my Art, but I cannot make it a mere trade, lacking as I do the desire for such things as mere wealth can obtain—I value not the admiration of those who know less than myself, and in the desire to extinguish partiality and [gap in copy] I have also extinguished ambition and more worthy emulation. I waver not in any good resolutions and will gladly devote the rest of my time principally to the object of being useful and doing good.'

But the affair was over and done with. After 1849 there are no more letters. In a sense it had never begun, for it was a love that was felt to be dangerous to both parties. Georgie regarded it as a folly that could not be indulged. Watts knew only too well the insecurity of his position. He knew that at present he could not support a wife, but he knew too that in Georgie he had found the constant resolute reliable woman whom he should have married. With her he had first learnt companionship and, what had surprised him, something more, for in those cool gardens in the evenings, at the drawing lessons, and at the little impromptu airs on the guitar there had blown across his life a warm wind that he hardly yet understood, and which even his visions could not give him. He may not have been head over heels in love. But love he had felt. And that love he could not possess. 'I could find it in my heart to wish you were an ill-used or overworked governess. Remember you once wished me raised!' In that lay the whole barrier. For she was the daughter of a baronet, and he—who was he?—for all his pretensions, a struggling artist who had taught her drawing. It was the old sad romantic tale.

[vi]

To the young painter everything was crashing down. He became overwhelmed by the realisation of the futility of his life. He had been struggling for he knew not what. He tried to paint the misery he felt by projecting it on what he saw around him. But *Found Drowned* and *Under a dry arch* did not succeed, for the subjects—of a dead pauper and a starving woman on the Embankment—were too close to him to kindle his artistic inspiration. He was becoming a prey to morbid fancies. On a walk back from an evening with the Ionides he saw before him as she passed the flickering street lamps a young woman dressed rather shabbily. As he walked be-

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hind he had his eyes riveted on the folds of her dress, thinking of the way they should be painted. Then quite suddenly the figure disappeared into a blank wall. This was the story Rossetti loved to tell in later years with every sort of supernatural embellishment.

More unusual was an occurrence in the studio. His bedroom was off a gallery which ran along one side of the room and was reached by a flight of stairs. Hearing a noise one summer night he stood at the top of these stairs in the darkness. He could hear the beating of wings as if some creature was attempting to take flight. Then came a rich far-off voice which filled the place and seemed to cry: 'Anima mia, anima mia!' After that all was unusually still. It was a warm night and Watts had not been to sleep.

Nevertheless he managed to carry on with something of the bravado of the Florentine days. Seeing a young woman in the street whom he admired for her stately beauty he obtained an introduction and in due course the young lady was painted. Her name was Virginia Pattle and she brought as chaperon her sister Mrs. Prinsep, the wife of a distinguished Indian Civil Servant. It was a momentous hour in Watts' life when Mrs. Prinsep entered his studio and shook him by the hand. For this short, untidy, artistic and extremely eccentric woman whom he had met so casually was to dominate his life for the next twenty years.

IV

LITTLE HOLLAND HOUSE

[i]

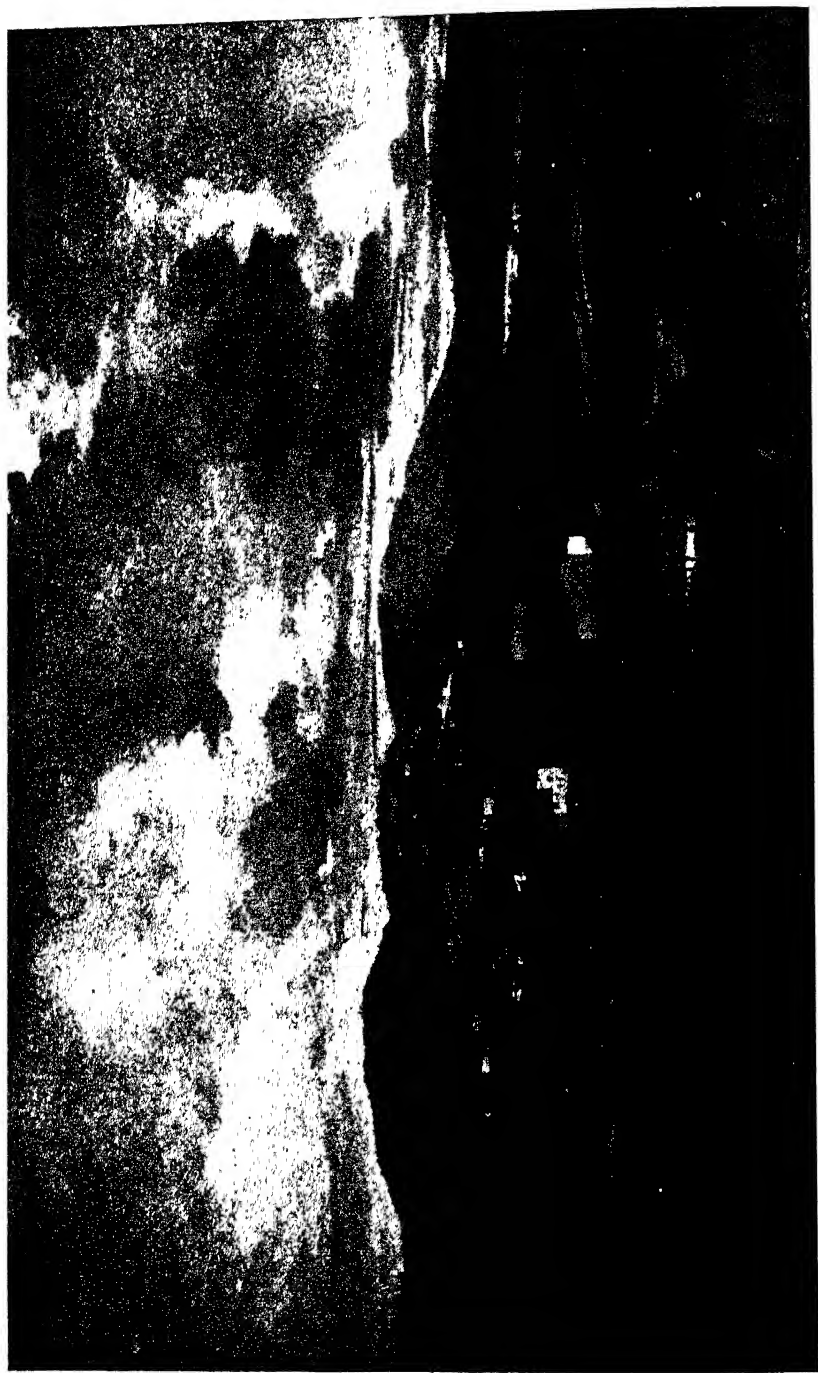
Mrs. Prinsep was delighted with Watts from the start. She raved over his pictures, enquired into his health, and interfered with the cook. To her mind he was abominably neglected. Was there no relation he could rely on? Watts had to tell his story. Mrs. Prinsep was more pleased than ever. Was he not an orphan of genius unable to cope with the world? And Watts could not help being charmed by such captivating eccentricity. He was soon a frequent guest at her house. However much he might protest, special little dishes that suited his stomach were placed before him. Mrs. Prinsep said that he must regard her home as his own.

Thoby Prinsep was of a very different character to his wife. He was large, genial, imperturbably philosophic, inclined to fatness. Everything he did was done grandly. His sneeze, it is said, was once received with an encore from the gallery of a theatre. He had been an important jurist in India, but he was not as strong as his six feet and robust face suggested; and at fifty he had retired. The rest of his life he spent as a member of the council of the India Office. Watts might have feared that the formidable jurist would have disapproved of his wife's open adulation. But Thoby who never could be angry looked on as blandly as he did on everything else. He knew that his wife intended to form a literary and artistic salon, and provided he could sometimes have the leisure to translate the classics and Indian stories, he did not much mind how his wife set about it. Indeed he found Watts an amusing and valuable companion. He could not but disapprove of his liberal opinions, but then artists were like that, quite cut off from reality as he knew it.

At 9 Chesterfield Street, where the Prinseps were living, Watts came to know Mrs. Prinsep's six sisters. Artistic to their fingertips, with a cult for beauty, they had devised dresses in defiance of fashion. They were designed upon simple lines and depended upon rich colour and large folds for their effect. Indeed, in clothes of her own invention with a cloak thrown slightly back from her shoulders, Virginia, who was living at Chesterfield Street with her sister, had become a celebrated beauty. It was not long before she was to marry Lord Somers.



7. LADY HOLLAND. ABOUT 1843



8. FIESOLE. 1844-5

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Mrs. Prinsep was not exceptionally beautiful: she was too squat and untidy. It was the personality that captivated. As if to compensate for her own lack of beauty, she worshipped it in others. Her nieces were told to read their Bibles before going to dances to give them 'heavenly expressions'. But if Mrs. Prinsep was the hostess and Lady Somers the beauty of the family, Mrs. Cameron was its genius. She had married an Indian jurist of a somewhat more indolent temperament than Thoby. Endowed sevenfold with the gifts of her sisters—save beauty—she was a tornado of energy, admonishing, delighting, and frightening her friends.

Watts enjoyed the atmosphere at Chesterfield Street. It was very homely and at the same time extravagantly artistic. It was fashionable yet moral, possessing all the Victorian virtues, and at the same time Bohemian. Watts seemed by right of birth to belong to it. And it was not long before he was flattered to see that Mrs. Prinsep had designed him to be the centre of her little salon. In her eyes he was as presentable as he was artistic, and through the Hollands already had many of the valuable connections she wished to obtain.

But first of all there was the difficulty of getting a suitable house. 9 Chesterfield Street was too small. Moreover it did not have enough character. At this time Lord Holland mentioned to Watts that the farm adjoining Holland House, Little Holland House as it was called, would be free for a suitable tenant. Little Holland House was a place with considerable historical associations. Cromwell had met Ireton there to discuss secret affairs of state. Lord Camelford had died in one of its quaint rooms after the duel with Mr. Best in the fields behind the house. And latterly it had been the home of Caroline Fox whom George IV had so much admired and who had entertained Macaulay, Mackintosh and Coleridge with many of her uncle's friends. Little Jeremy Bentham had often come in for a meal. It was indeed rumoured that he had asked Miss Fox to marry him. But she had wisely refused and become the perfect maiden aunt.

The house itself was not imposing. It 'was an old farmhouse', a writer in the fifties described it, 'and has had another house as it were built on to it, so that the rooms are low and large, and wainscotted, and oddly placed in relation to each other, and then there are long passages, and out you come again into rooms where you don't expect them.' It was set in a garden where 'everything is free and green and beautiful, with trees and flowers.'¹ There were long lawns under great overarching trees and all round stretched the farm and beyond it the country, for Kensington was still undeveloped. Indeed the land between the High Street and the river

¹ *Letters of the Hon. Mrs. Edward Twisleton written to her family, 1852-62*, London, 1928, p.

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was felt at this time to be very desolate with its gleaming canals in the sunset and the thorn hedges and field after field of cabbages. In the evenings the mist would rise, creep up the High Street, past the lighted window of the Catholic repository in Old Street with its tawdry crosses and medallions, rub its way along the high brown wall which enclosed the Gardens, past Kensington Gore where sheep still grazed, and so up through the park into London. In Summer the meadows round Little Holland House were golden in the sun, and the cabbage fields looked like a silver sea as you walked down the lanes to Fulham or Earl's Court.

It was a place after Mrs. Prinsep's heart. She considered that it was made for her. Its rambling rooms and corridors just suited the untidiness of her mixed French and Irish descent. It could not be denied that it was far out, too far to be fashionable, but Mrs. Prinsep decided to snap her fingers at fashion in this matter as she had done over dress. She would make it fashionable to live outside London. And assuredly Thoby would find it very refreshing to retire to a land of meadows and haystacks after his work at the India Office. It delighted her to think that the distinguished guests she meant to entertain would have to duck their heads beneath a porch of untidy thatch.

In 1850 Thoby signed a lease for twenty-one years with Lord Holland. At the beginning of the next year the Prinseps were firmly established. But although they were now much further from Watts than they had been the intercourse was not only maintained but developed. Watts had been seriously ill. He would sit by the hour doing nothing. Melancholy would envelop him like a thick impenetrable cloud and leave him inert and frustrated. The very capacity to feel seemed to be taken from him. 'I do not expect', he wrote, 'at most to have the opportunity of doing more than prepare the way for better men and not that always; more often I sit among the ruins of my aspirations, watching the tide of time.'¹ And the tide of time seemed interminably grey and opposed to his will. Mrs. Prinsep did what she could for him, but she realised that without companionship and the cheerful influence of a family circle he was not likely to get better. When she saw his pale dejected face the floodgates of her warm generous heart were opened. Soon after the Prinseps had settled in, Watts was persuaded to make Little Holland House his home.

[ii]

'[Mrs. Prinsep] is rather stout and not handsome, but delightful to look at, and the sort of person one would like to live under the shadow of or

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 127.

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rather bask in the sunlight of.'¹ The writer was an American lady, Mrs. Twisleton, who had married an Englishman and was writing home to her sisters. When she called at Little Holland House Mrs. Prinsep 'came and greeted us, in her own dear, delightful way, and carried me off to introduce me to her sisters. . . . Lady Somers is fair, and round and sweet, and Mrs. Prinsep's "darling" as she says, and looks as if she might be anyone's darling, but really not so charming to me as Mrs. P. herself, as is often the case with such warm-hearted people's idols. . . . Mrs. Prinsep came again, and took both my hands in hers, and said she was so glad to see me with her sisters, and that I must learn to call them all by their names, and not Mrs., and they were so sweet with each other, and so sweet to me, and overcame me so, with every kind of loving-kindness, that I was really upset, and fairly cried in Mrs. Prinsep's face. . . . When I found my best kid gloves and my best white bonnet strings, and my best company face, all in danger of being flooded so unexpectedly, I got up and rushed off with Mrs. Prinsep and she took me into such an artist's studio, and kept on being perfectly lovely to me, while I wiped up, dreadfully ashamed of myself, as fast as I could.'

Lunch was often eccentric at Little Holland House. 'A sort of luncheon', Mrs. Twisleton called it, 'that is strawberries, etc., were on the table, but there were three rooms and people in all of them, and nobody was bound to eat anything if they didn't want it.' Dinner, too, was often strangely disconcerting. Mrs. Prinsep would suddenly change the seats of the guests or whirl them off to another room for dessert—a proceeding which as time went on became an established custom.^{2 3}

It was a warm, informal, but elevated atmosphere Mrs. Prinsep created at Little Holland House. To the conventional Victorian, if it was not disconcerting, it seemed cranky and absurd. It was putting off suddenly to be told to stand still in the middle of a party by Watts while he sketched the drapery of one's dress in a delicate ivory-backed notebook. And the mundane Victorian was not a little embarrassed by the strange frescoes—personifications of Egypt and Assyria—on the walls. Highly frivolous and unreal was what such a person thought it.

Once at the little porch one stepped into a new world, so different was it from the four-square world of Kensington High Street such a short distance away where the carts and carriages rumbled and jangled up to Lon-

¹ Twisleton, p. 96.

² The friendship between Mrs. Twisleton and Mrs. Prinsep, begun with such enthusiasm, ended quickly in disillusion over the marriage of a mutual friend. Mrs. Twisleton discovered that Mrs. Prinsep and her sisters suffered from 'grave moral defects.'

³ Twisleton, pp. 104-106.

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don. To admirers it seemed as if Little Holland House was a haven from which everything but high living and the pursuit of beauty had been removed. It did not matter whether one was an atheist, an aesthete, a dreamer, or an economist. Provided one had high ideals Mrs. Prinsep was always ready to welcome.

Watts, behind the red baize door of his studio aspiring to perfect art or listening intently, with his pale melancholy face, was the personification of Mrs. Prinsep's ideal. He was known by everybody as Signor—a title and pet-name. It almost seemed as if the household with its culte for beauty revolved round him while Mrs. Prinsep, cumbered and irritated in her passionate way by the duties of housewife, ministered only to him. But in reality Watts was often at the periphery of the household's doings. He would be produced like a special dish to help out a party on the spacious lawns. A genius he was in Mrs. Prinsep's eyes and as such his light was not to be hidden. It was only right that he should shine for her guests.

But what of Thoby and the family? Thoby was the one refreshingly ordinary person in the household. Watts and Mrs. Prinsep might make the place a hothouse, but Thoby belonged to the hardy race that lived outside. Not that one felt there was any opposition between Thoby's attitude and his wife's. He had no inclination to prevent her bustling activities. It seemed almost as if he throve, like some majestic plant, at the edge of the whirlpool. Whatever eccentricity or outrageous thing his wife might do, one would be sure to see him sitting comfortably in his arm chair as he talked to distinguished visitors or listened to the stories of the innumerable children who overran the house. He had had an active life and he meant to spend his declining days in peace. Having made up his mind to it the comings and goings entailed in the process of building a literary and artistic salon failed to disturb him.

Watts and Thoby got on well. They would have little quarrels over politics—at least Watts would become petulant, but there was never any serious disagreement. They balanced each other so very well! Thoby was suffering from cataract and was to some extent treated like an invalid. So Watts did not feel out of it. When Watts' nerves were on edge or he felt depressed Thoby's reassuring immobility did more to soothe him than all Mrs. Prinsep's energetic nursing.

Gradually Watts regained his strength. At first he was terribly indolent. Lord Holland had been irritated at it in Italy. At Charles Street it had almost become an obsession. Everything seemed so utterly futile that he could not bring himself to undergo the drudgery that painting entailed. But little by little in the more stable atmosphere of Little Holland House he began to find solace in work. And the visions that had haunted his



9. DETAIL FROM STORY FROM BOCCACCIO. 1844-7



10. FATA MORGANA

1846-7

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boyhood did not seem such cheats. Before they had been simply beautiful. Now they were becoming endowed with moral qualities. And as such he did not feel guilty in indulging them.

But at first it was only with great difficulty that he managed to force himself to work. Indeed, Mrs. Prinsep would get her son Val and other energetic young men to see that Watts kept to his studio and carried out his undertakings. However much he might love his visions it was noticed that he seemed to shrink from the test of putting them on to canvas. Gradually, however, he schooled himself into a rigid routine. He would rise at dawn and work till breakfast. A short interval would follow and then there would be work till lunch-time. After lunch two comfortable couches would be got ready in a half-lighted room and a woman reader would appear. Watts and Thoby would talk politely to her for a minute or two, and then they would lie down on the couches and the woman would begin. As she read Watts would sometimes raise his hand in approval or gently shake his head. Thoby would grunt his assent and occasionally illustrate the text with his encyclopaedic knowledge. Later, Thoby would sometimes have to return to India House, generally he would walk or sit in the garden. Watts would go for a short ride or play at giant strides with the children in the garden. Then he would go back to his studio till the light failed.

In the evenings there would be stories and music, though Thoby often worked at mathematics or the composition of an Indian story in verse. On such evenings Laura Taylor, Watts' friend, would come over from Laverder Sweep. In the later fifties Tennyson would sometimes come too and enjoy Laura's singing very much. She made a great art of it and had composed the music for a poem called *The Sisters*. This was her favourite piece and she would sing it with tremendous energy. When Tennyson first heard her come to the line 'Three times I stabbed him thro' and thro'', which she rendered most dramatically, he turned to Watts and said in a gruff excited voice: 'And she would have done it too.' Dicky Doyle, the designer of the cover of *Punch*, was another friend who would often dine at Little Holland House. It was a recognised custom on Christmas day that he arrived with an old umbrella and would always find a new one in the stand waiting for him on his departure—or so the story went. Little Holland House was a place where such legends arose.

[iii]

'Mrs. Prinsep', wrote Mrs. Twisleton in 1853, 'has taken into her house and home a poor forlorn artist, with great talents and weak health,

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and education. Alas! poor snobs! If some energetic house miscreant were to white-wash heaven and hang the walls of it with red flock paper you might have an opportunity of judging whether the alteration of colour improved it or not. Mind, I am only speaking with regard to colour . . . (I have just gone and dipped my pen in the coffee which has improved the flavour very much). I had another ride with Watts today and lots of jumping, some of it rather stiff. . . . By the way, Watts wishes me to keep secret his paintings in illustration of Dante at present. So please don't mention it.¹

In another letter Stanhope mentioned that Watts had paid even more attention to him than usual. 'I am more and more convinced every day of his great powers, so my father must never venture to say again before me that we have not talent in England, for we have an artist of the highest order, and this I am confident time will prove. His works when they get spread about will place him high amongst the masters of Art; and in the meantime it is a satisfaction to feel that I have got as a master the first artist in England.'²

But Lady Elizabeth, his mother, was far from satisfied. Her son's enthusiasm was suspicious. No doubt she had heard of the Prinsep's Bohemianism, for enemies spoke sneeringly of Mrs. Prinsep's 'tea gardens' and of Thoby as 'dog Thoby'. To the outsider Little Holland House was the home of cranks. 'I mean to satisfy myself when I go to town what is his [Watts'] influence, *moral as well as artistic*', she wrote. On the 16th April, 1852, she wrote again: 'I found Roddy at his High Art this morning before breakfast. He is crazy about Flaxman, and has been riding in the park with Mr. W. Russell, Lord William Russell's son, who is as crazy as himself. Walter [Roddam's brother] thought Watts' things at the studio splendid. I mean to judge of them myself by walking down there with Roddy tomorrow . . . I questioned him closely about Watts last night. He thinks most highly of his *character* and I do not think there can be much harm in him. When we arrived from Yorkshire yesterday he had made an illumination ready for us, on the mantelpiece, of five hand-candles and two others, and was as pleased with it as any schoolboy. Obviously *he has nothing on his conscience!* I hear there is a merry-go-round in the garden at Little Holland House, and three Prinsep boys and their tutor, with Roddy and Watts, go round and round on it till they are quite exhausted. *Very innocent!*'

Strangely enough it was not Watts' morality that she came to dislike, but his painting and tuition. 'Though Roddy has done wonders', she wrote, 'I have still my doubts, as his drawing is still decidedly wrong, and so is

¹ A. M. W. Stirling: *A Painter of Dreams*, p. 305.

² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

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Watts', with all his genius. I wish you could see the horrible, naked, mutilated figures from the Elgin Marbles with which he intends to *decorate the Governesses' Institution*. There is one as large as life, I think it is the Theseus—enough to frighten them all out of their wits.¹

But Lady Elizabeth's was not the attitude usually adopted by women at this time. For the most part they raved about Watts. Mrs. Prinsep's friends, at all events, vied with each other to make Watts and the coterie as important as the Pattle sisters considered them to be. In Lady Ritchie's novel, *Old Kensington*, we see the picture as Mrs. Prinsep would have had it painted.

'A painter lived in the house to which Raban was going. It stood, as he said, in Nightingale Lane, within garden walls. It looked like a farm house, with its many tiles and chimneys, standing in the sweet old garden fringed with rose bushes. There were poplar-trees and snowball-trees and may-flowers in their season, and lilies-of-the-valley growing in the shade. The lawn was dappled with many shadows of sweet things. From the thatched porch you could hear the rural clucking of poultry and the lowing of cattle and see the sloping roof of a farm house beyond the elms. . . . Perhaps Sir Joshua may have sometimes walked across from Holland House, five minutes off, where he was, a hundred years ago, painting two beautiful young ladies. Only yesterday I saw them; one leant from a window in the wall, the other stood without, holding a dove in her extended hand; a boy was by her side. Those ladies have left the window long since; but others, not less beautiful, still come up Nightingale Lane, to visit the Sir Joshua of our own time in his studio, built against the hospitable house. My heroine comes perforce, and looks at the old gables and elm-trees and stands under the rustic porch . . .'

The young people were crowding the doorway when the door suddenly opened wide. 'A servant carrying papers and parcels came out, followed by a lady in a flowing silk dress, with a lace hood upon her head, [Mrs. Prinsep], and by a stately-looking gentleman, in a long grey coat; erect and with silver hair and a noble and benevolent head [Thoby Prinsep].

' "Why is not the carriage come up?" said the lady to the servant, who set off immediately running with his parcels in his arms; then seeing Dolly, who was standing blushing and confused by the open door, she said kindly, "Have you come to see the studios?"

"They were invited to see the pictures.

' "My servant shall show you the way", said the lady, with a smile, and as the servant came back, followed by a carriage, she gave him a few

¹ A. M. Stirling: *A Painter of Dreams*, pp. 307, 308.

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parting directions. Then the councillor and the lady drove off to the India Office as hard as the horses could go.

'It was a white letter day with Dolly. She followed the servant up an oak passage, and by a long wall, where flying figures were painted. The servant opened a side door into a room with a great window, and my heroine found herself in better company than she had ever been in all her life before. Two visitors were already in the studio. One was a lady with a pale and gentle face—Dolly remembered it long afterwards when they met again—but just then she only thought of the pictures there were crowding upon the walls sumptuous and silent—the men and women of our day who seem already to belong to the future, as one looks at the solemn eyes watching from the canvas. Sweet woman's faces lighted with some spiritual grace, poets, soldiers, rulers and wind-bags, side by side, each telling their story in a well-known name. There were children, too, smiling, sketches, half done, growing from the canvas, and here and there a dream made into a vision, of Justice or of Oblivion. Of Silence, and lo! Titans from their everlasting hills lie watching the mists of life; or infinite Peace behold, an Angel of Death is waiting against a solemn disc. Dolly felt as though she had come with Christian to some mystical house along the way. For some minutes past she had been gazing at the solemn Angel—she was absorbed, she could not take her eyes away. She did not know that the painter [Watts] had come in, and was standing near her.

"Do you know what that is?" said he, coming up to her.

"Yes," answered Dolly in a low voice; "I have only once seen death. I think this must be it; only it is not terrible, as I thought."

"I did not mean to make it terrible", the painter said, struck by her passing likeness to the face at which she was gazing so steadfastly.

Raban also noticed the gentle and powerful look, and in that moment he understood her better than he had ever done before; he felt as if a sudden ray of faith and love had fallen into his dark heart.

'Before they left Mr. Royal introduced Dolly to the two ladies who were in the studio. He had painted the head of one of them upon a little wooden panel that leant upon an easel by which the two ladies were standing. One of them spoke: "How her children will prize your gift, Mr. Royal; it is not the likeness only, it is something more than likeness."

"Life is short; one cannot do all things," said the painter quietly, "I have tried not so much to imitate what I see as to paint people and things as I feel them, and as others appear to me to feel them."

Dolly thought how many people he must have taught to feel, to see with their eyes, and to understand.

'All the way home she was talking of the pictures'.

LITTLE HOLLAND HOUSE

But others in the party were less aesthetic.

"I saw a great many likenesses which were really admirable," said Robert, "I have met several of the people out at dinner."

"Rhody could not say a single word about the pictures.

"Why, what were you about?" said Dolly, after she had mentioned two or three one after another, "you don't seem to have looked at anything."

"You didn't come into the back room, Dolly. I had an excellent cup of tea there," said George, "that kind lady had it sent up for us." ¹

'John took me', wrote Lady Constance Leslie in the same strain, 'to what was to me a new world—something I had never imagined before of beauty and kindness. I was a very ignorant little girl, and oh how proud I felt, though rather unworthy of what seemed holy ground. The Signor came out of his studio all spirit and so delicate, and received me very kindly as John's future wife. Thackeray was there with his young daughters, Coutts Lindsay,² Jacob Omnium,³ and Lady Somers, glorious and benevolent. Signor was the whole object of adoration and care in that house. He seemed to sanctify Little Holland House.'⁴

Little Holland House, indeed, fired the imagination of Mrs. Prinsep's guests. But what they wrote was not always truthful. Under Mrs. Prinsep's influence they could not but exaggerate. The relaxation of Victorian manners, the culture, the high living, were too much for them. The descriptions are all in party dress. There was Mrs. Prinsep with her charming, generous nature, there was Watts the genius so happily working at his great creations, there was Thoby reposing after his toil in India. But was it all quite true? The picture is too simple and too glowing. Behind the exterior there was as much unhappiness as there was elsewhere in the world.

It is true that in some ways Mrs. Prinsep's invitation to Watts was the most fortunate event in his life. It is not difficult to see how he benefited. His delicate health and melancholy would have crippled his chances of success if he had remained alone. At Little Holland House he became almost a member of the family and was able to paint without financial or domestic worries. At the same time he was in a milieu in which he could meet distinguished men whom he talked with and painted. By himself he might well have been too shy to ensure a regular succession of sitters. But at Little Holland House he had Mrs. Prinsep to bully and flatter the famous into his studio. No doubt Watts would sometimes shrug his

¹ Anne Thackeray Ritchie: *Old Kensington*, London, 1891. Vol i, pp. 130-134.

² Later proprietor of the Grosvenor Gallery.

³ Matthew James Higgins, journalist, contributor to *Punch* and *The Times*.

⁴ M. S. Watts, i, pp. 159, 160.

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shoulders and deprecate her high-handed methods, but he knew in his heart that without them he could not succeed. In addition Mrs. Prinsep was no mean stage manager. She was convinced that Watts was a genius and as a genius he was treated. Sitters were enormously impressed by her manner with the painter, which was as reverential in things artistic as it was brusquely managing in mundane affairs. Watts appeared like a forlorn orphan of genius whom the gods only made miserable in order to make great. Sitters were pleased to be attended to by a man who looked and behaved like an old Master. And did not the queer little man often tell them in youthful enthusiasm, with a buoyant emotion which reminded them of Shelley, that it was his intention to paint a Palace of Fame? It was not a trivial matter, perhaps, to be placed within its portals.

Nevertheless, the adulation and attention was not altogether good for Watts. The sensitiveness of his nature was crushed by Mrs. Prinsep's great energy. And the more she loved him and fussed over him the more he fell into her clutches. At times it seemed as if there was something devouring in her devotion. If he did not act the part she had assigned him, her love might suddenly cease and with it the warmth, shelter, and attention she provided. He grew to be dependent just as her heart intended. Despite her concern at his headaches, and in spite of the trouble of special dishes, of medicines and diets, what would Aunt Sara, as everyone called her, have done had Watts been well? Her love in the last analysis was not given for nothing. It demanded in return a childlike dependence from Watts—a dependence kept in being by his ill-health.

He still suffered as he had done as a boy. Fearful headaches and nausea would afflict him. For hours on end he would lie stretched out on his bed motionless. To young Val Prinsep he looked like a corpse. Sometimes as the attacks began he would be given his meals at a separate table, Mrs. Prinsep fussing round him. His letters of these years are full of illness: 'I am such a wretched creature', he would write again and again; or, 'I would come with pleasure but as you know I dare not dine out.'

He still was not a happy man. His nature yearned for someone more quiet and subtle than Mrs. Prinsep—not a manager of his life, but someone in whom he could confide. When he found that person in Mrs. Nassau Senior he poured out to her the wretchedness that often overtook him. What he said bore little resemblance to the eulogies Mrs. Prinsep's friends went home to write in their journals and letters.

Jeannie Nassau Senior was the daughter-in-law of the old economist, who gave the worldly advice that a young man should study theology, but if he came to any unusual conclusions he should not mention them. She was the sister of Tom Hughes, who was to write *Tom Brown's School-days*.



J. C. F. WATTS BY C. COLSENS



12. LIFE'S ILLUSIONS

1849

LITTLE HOLLAND HOUSE

Jeannie was a graceful and accomplished woman greatly loved for her selfless character. Her interest in social questions had led her to originate the 'Association for befriending Young Servants'. It was a bold step for a woman to take in those days, and the help she gave to friendless girls who had had illegitimate children was often thought disgraceful. Some society ladies would not even mention her name, and referred to her as 'that woman'. In their eyes she had defiled her sex. In 1874 she was appointed inspector of workhouses, the first woman to hold the position.

One would have supposed Mrs. Senior to have been too busy about other matters to worry about Watts, and indeed he often did complain that she had failed to see him. But her heart was very sympathetic. She saw in him a fellow creature who needed comfort—and she gave it readily and without stint. She also greatly admired his work. She found the best way with Watts was to let him write his troubles to her. She would read and listen to his self-revelations and do all in her power to soothe his nerves. All was well, she would reply. There was nothing to worry about. It was easy to make a fool of oneself. Such advice was sure in effect, and involved no feeling of dependence.

To Jeannie Senior Watts wrote as if in a diary. He confided in her the aspirations that floated through his mind. 'I leave off reading', he wrote, 'to write what I am now saying, being stimulated by this sentence: "The one-ness of God, the Brother-hood of men, the soul's immortality, the need of a virtuous, blameless, brave life on earth—these were the great truths of Christianity, and they were set off by a life as great as the truths, a life of brave work, and of manly self-denial and self-sacrifice."'

'Such are words that ever stir me as the trumpet stirs the soldier, a brave life, let the future be what it may, a brave life of earnest striving after good, is what I would make my existence. This is a keynote of a composition in the minor, mournful and weak, but its aspirations shall at least save it from meanness. Perhaps you will think me absurd to send you all this, especially if it should happen when the nature of your occupations may jar with its tone, but as I know your great friendship for me, and as I have become your true and sincere friend, it is fit you should see me as I am, even tho' you should feel so alarmed as to take me for a methodist parson.'¹

But most often he had to tell her of the sadness of his life and how he felt out of sorts.

'I was sorry I went to your Mother's fête this afternoon. I felt like a savage beast, out of harmony with everything good and happy. I am not fit for anything, certainly not to have friends, unless they could be exempt from the common ills that flesh is heir to.'

¹ Compton collection of letters for this and following. They are not dated.

ELLEN TERRY

The two girls paused outside Watts' studio. The elder was dark, erect, mature; the younger dreamy and romantic with strikingly lovely auburn hair. The elder girl was quite at her ease, but the younger could not suppress her excitement.

The dark-haired girl was Kate Terry, who had come at Tom Taylor's request to have her portrait painted. Taylor had beamed behind his little glasses with delight at the thought that Kate was just Watts' type. Ellen, her younger sister, was with her to act as chaperon.

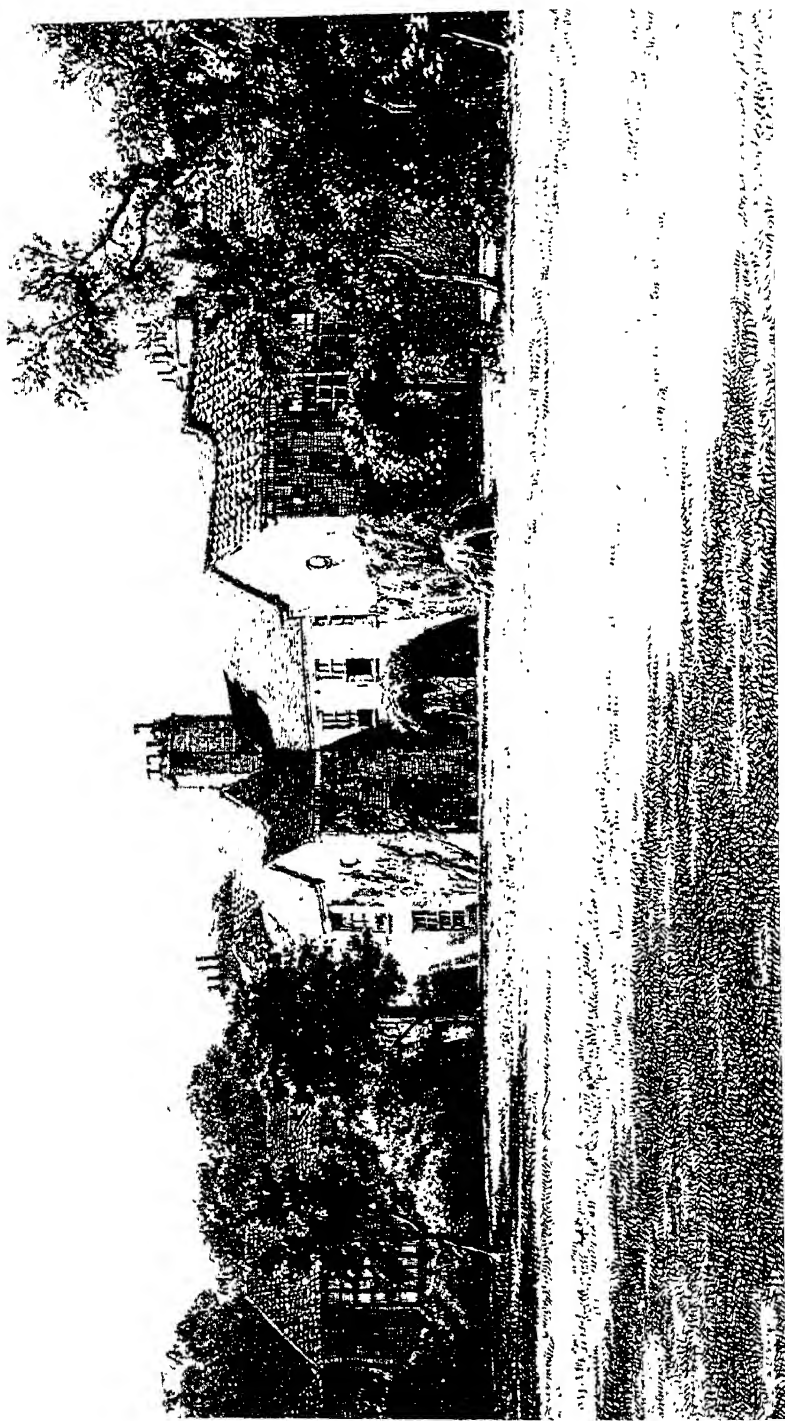
Kate Terry was seventeen and already had an established popularity as an actress with a small but discriminating public. Ellen, or Nell as she was called, had not as yet made so much of a mark. She was, after all, only fifteen. Yet in those short years she had crammed in enough work for a veteran. Already she possessed that directness of response to her surroundings which is the mark of natural genius. Her individuality had blossomed uninhibited in the strange, closed world of the Victorian theatre where the stage was a god who demanded endless sacrifices. Mr. and Mrs. Terry considered every inconvenience worth while for the almost fanatical pleasure they took in acting. If anything could have cured them of love of the stage one would have thought a family of eleven children would have done so. In fact it did nothing of the kind. Mrs. Terry moved in a squalid bustle from one lodging house to another without it ever entering her head that family life and the stage do not agree. With a heroism that is really wonderful she tried and almost succeeded in combining the Victorian ideal of the family with a nomad's life in the newly industrialised North of England.

She did not altogether succeed. Her children were very conscious of the deficiencies in their background. They hungered for the prettiness and comfort of home life, perhaps, above all, for the leisure to live in a refined atmosphere. They longed to leave behind them as bad dreams the hideous attic kitchens in which Nell had had to cook from the age of five.

It was at first arranged by Tom Taylor that Kate should go to Little Holland House alone. But her parents were conventional people and did not think it proper. And as Mrs. Terry was immersed in the domesticities of her large family, Nell was chosen as chaperon. Thus the two paused at



13. MRS. THOBY PRINSEP CALLED IN THE TIME OF
GIORGIONE (UNFINISHED) STARTED EARLY '60s,
CONTINUED EARLY '90s



14. LITTLE HOLLAND HOUSE. A RECONSTRUCTION OF WHAT IT WAS
LIKE, BY F. L. GRIGGS. PEN AND INK

the baize door of the studio, while Watts, the other side, touched away nervously as he awaited them. He did not know how the Terrys were to upset his life.

The girls were delighted with Little Holland House. It was just what they lacked and what they were looking for. The dim corridors with the strange figures painted on the walls, the subdued rooms, the allegories, the delicate conversation, the great garden with its trees, lawns, and creepers, ravished them. Then there were the distinguished visitors whom they hardly dared believe they were actually meeting. And at the centre of it all was the red baize door that led to Watts' studio. Behind that door was the quintessence of their dreams. There was refinement super-refined, there was the most noble of all nobility. The vast canvases, the huge romantic allegories, the remote mystical associations the great studio conjured up overpowered them. There indeed seemed to be enchantment.

Taylor was by no means disappointed at the reaction of the girls. Who knew how high Kate might climb were she to become the familiar of Little Holland House? The thought struck him that she might not merely be the familiar, she might in a sense become mistress of the place. Watts obviously needed a wife. He was never well, and he had fits of extraordinary depression. A wife would cure him of a good deal of nonsense. What a union! Two creators of beauty married. It all seemed like one of his plays.

The sitting went well. But Kate was not painted alone, and the picture turned into *The two sisters*. It was not long before it was plain even to Tom Taylor, who was all his life to admire Kate more than Ellen, that it was the younger sister who was preferred. It was she who was Watts' type. There was something sculpturesque about her lively face which appealed to the artist. Yet with the firm chin there went natural good humour and playful girlish ways. For Nell, despite her work at the theatre, was still a child, while Kate was already a woman. It was her youth, her direct response to things—her genius for life as it were, that attracted Watts. Beauty as seen in her was freshness and spring and joy. He was little able to appreciate personality and when he painted Ellen he was not painting her, but youth. Youth that he had never known, youth that he regretted, youth that brought tears of joy.

Behind the scenes the intriguers were at work. Tom Taylor and Mrs. Prinsep put their heads together. Lady Somers was called in. And before long it was arranged that Watts and the girl who was young enough to be his daughter should be married. Watts was probably tormented with indecision. Was he right to marry one so much younger than himself? Henry Taylor, the poet and friend of Mrs. Cameron, it is true had married

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a very young wife and it had been a complete success. And there were certain things to be said in favour of the marriage. He was definitely attracted to her youth as he probably would not have been to an older woman. It was certain, as well, that Nell was ravished with the life of Little Holland House. Mrs. Prinsep agreed that to have so young and so attractive a character in the house would be delightful. Everyone Watts consulted was pleased with the idea. Tom Taylor was a man of the world and should know.

Yet was Watts in love with Nell? Probably not. What happened later could never have occurred had he been. But he was certainly attracted and had a tender affection for her that was as near normal marital love as he ever knew it. He loved her, perhaps, too much as an indulgent uncle loves his niece. And yet there were moments when it was more than that. A lively warmth that is elsewhere lacking, blushes momentarily through some of his portraits of her. Nell might not be Nell in the pictures, but the youth which she personified brought some blood to his heart. But outside the studio, when his dreaming robes were doffed, Nell was just another charming little girl.

Watts was in a nervous state when the marriage was being arranged and leant on everybody's advice—that is to say on the three conspirators who had made the plan. He weakly fell in with the idea that Nell should be introduced into the Little Holland House menage. The idea of setting up on his own was abhorrent. The thought of a move, of buying furniture, fear of expense and terror of the unknown, probably all played their part in making him acquiesce in this strange decision. Of course Nell loved to think she would actually live in her dream house. She did not want to move an inch from it. In her eyes it was a perfectly natural arrangement. Signor was the centre of the place. In any case Mrs. Prinsep saw that Nell was not capable of setting up house for herself, and Watts was not the person to help her.

Indeed, the whole idea of a joint menage must have come from Mrs. Prinsep. She had her own reasons, which were not only social, for wishing to keep her painter. Where would he be without her care, and where would she? Besides, he had become part of her life. His existence had become woven into hers. It was, for instance, quite impossible to think of showing visitors over the house without a tap at the studio door. In her more rational moods Mrs. Prinsep would argue that it was better for Nell to get to know about her husband and his ways in an atmosphere where mistakes would not be disastrous. How could the poor child think of dealing with him when he had the migraine or was in one of his nervous moods?

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On the surface the scheme appeared pretty good. Watts and Nell were to be educated to each other until such time as she was capable of setting up house for herself. Unfortunately the scheme forgot the characters, the altogether exceptional characters of the two women involved.

The Terrys were, of course, very pleased despite the disparity of age between the couple. It was a rise in social status for their girl and they were not people to minimise such things. Besides, Nell had begun to show herself discontented with life in the theatre. She found it sordid and only partially satisfying. The Victorian theatre made too many demands on her vivid individuality. It was true, of course, that she could not continue to act, which was a big blow to the Terrys. But her happiness and status more than compensated for that. Whether Watts came to know his in-laws we do not know. In any case all formalities which might have upset him were relegated to Mrs. Prinsep. No doubt hard-boiled Laura Taylor also took a hand in such matters.

The wedding took place in February, 1864. It was a small affair, as Watts would have been frightened to death by anything on a large scale. Nell was dressed in a brown frock designed by Holman Hunt and had a spray of orange blossom in her quilted white bonnet. She was wrapped in a beautiful Indian shawl. She went away in a sealskin coat with coral buttons, and a little sealskin cap. As the carriage drove away the sixteen-year-old bride began to weep, not because she was unhappy, but because she was wondering at the step she had taken. It all seemed like a dream. Watts did not take her in his arms. He was rather fussed and he only said kindly: 'Don't cry. It makes your nose swell.'

Whether they went for a honeymoon we do not know. But the marriage was not consummated. The summer was spent at Freshwater near Mrs. Cameron at Dimbola and Tennyson at Farringford. Nell soon found she was very out of things. Mrs. Prinsep, who had been so nice to meet at a party, was a very different person if you were placed in her charge. Nell sat shrinking and timid in corners while Watts and his distinguished acquaintances talked. The situation became very difficult. Nell did not know what her position was, whether she was meant to play the child or the wife. Watts was too nervous and uncertain to do anything about it and vaguely hoped everything would come right in the end. As to Mrs. Prinsep—her feelings were beyond her control. It was all very well to meet this charming wayward girl in a drawing-room, but to live with her, to be intimately connected with her was quite another matter. In some way or other she distrusted the girl from the theatre. She was very pretty and attractive. But was she good enough for Watts? The Signor wanted something more than a pretty face. Her jealousy was manifest in a thousand

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surveillances, and especially in a half concealed, though purposely obvious fear that Nell would misbehave herself before the distinguished guests. Nell was told that she must listen and not try to speak herself. After all, Mrs. Prinsep argued, the child had had no education and no manners except what the stage had provided for her. The little coterie found that Nell did not quite possess the right attitude to her new position in life. She must be educated up to it.

Poor Nell! What an education it was. Mrs. Prinsep was as badly endowed with the gift of teaching as anyone could be. She was impatient, dogmatic and confusing. She imagined that she had an intuitive knowledge into the graces of civilised life—not the graces that adorned the other houses in London. No. It was difficult to lay one's finger on what it was. It was, shall we say, a charm that created an atmosphere, made a social system of itself, a charm which could break the conventions of the world outside with impunity. It was none other than this that Mrs. Prinsep set out to teach Nell Terry. She wanted to mould her into an ornament for the Little Holland House coterie.

But Mrs. Prinsep was thwarted at every turn. Into the artistic-moral atmosphere of Little Holland House the real artist had broken. Though she did not know it, Mrs. Prinsep was confronted with an artistic genius which at least rivalled the Signor's. Nell was too intelligent and had far too much spirit to be subjected in the way her mentor wanted. What she learnt she had to learn in her own way. And Mrs. Prinsep was always being entangled in her own jealousy. It annoyed her that despite her lack of high education Nell was attractive in her own right. With vindictive envy, not untinged with admiration, Mrs. Prinsep saw to it that at all events Nell should not shine more brightly than herself. The little actress was made to feel she did not belong in the drawing-room. She met Gladstone, Browning and Taylor, but they meant little to her, as they treated her not as Watts' wife but as a child. Gladstone with his deep smouldering eyes and rugged features reminded her of a volcano at rest. Browning with his well-pressed clothes and glossy hat she could hardly believe was a poet. She found it more congenial not to worry about these great men, and to run into the garden and play Red Indians with the Cameron or Tennyson children. But with them, too, she must have felt at a disadvantage, for they cannot but have regarded her as different from themselves. She was married, and that meant a lot. Besides, she had spent all her life on the stage and had had all sorts of strange adventures unfamiliar to their experience.

She did, however, make one friend at Freshwater. Tennyson took a great fancy to her. The poet would take her for walks and hold her little

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hand in his great leather pocket of a paw and tell her about the birds and trees. It refreshed him to stand on a down with this vital little girl—her hair down and shining like gold from under her brown mushroom hat which she tied under her chin. Together they would watch the wheeling of swallows at nightfall, and he picked Nell the first pimpernel she had ever seen. He was kind and fatherly to her and with him she did not feel shy. In the evenings she loved to hear him read. At first she irreverently found it rather funny. He chanted it in his deep voice like an incantation moving his great hand up and down to the beat of the music. The *Northern Farmer* was the favourite and after that Browning's *Ride from Ghent*. It gave Tennyson great pleasure to simulate the beat of the horses' hoofs. An occupation Nell enjoyed before the evening started was the preparation of the poet's long churchwarden pipe. The stem had to be dipped in a special solution of sal volatile or something of the kind to prevent his lips sticking to it.

In some ways the days at Freshwater were not unhappy for Nell. She had a temperament that quickly reacted, and in the garden or with Tennyson she soon forgot the difficulties with Mrs. Prinsep. And there was a good deal of work to do besides what applied to her own transformation into a fit wife for the painter. There was Mrs. Cameron, who had taken up photography with her usual energy, to sit for—no trivial ordeal. She had to sit in a rigid position for about twenty minutes at a stretch. If she moved Mrs. Cameron would say the plate was ruined and, what was worse, instead of giving up the sitting as a bad job would begin all over again. The photographer was stupendously energetic and Nell was taken in every position. Such a beautiful model was not often come by.

When Nell returned to Little Holland House there was Watts to please as well. But this was not in the nature of a task. Nell genuinely revered him and found it very congenial to be of use to him. It meant a lot to have the face he loved to paint. She was posed as Ophelia gazing tragically over the brook, and was dressed in armour for *The Watchman*. In the sitting for the last picture the armour became too heavy and as Watts was energetically touching away she crashed to the floor in a faint. Such was the rigorous education the pursuit of beauty and the fitting of herself to be Watts' wife entailed.

Meantime things were not going as Mrs. Prinsep had planned. Nell was too old to be sent from the drawing-room into the nursery. She began to resent the inferior place assigned her. She considered it her right to be treated as Watts' wife. But Mrs. Prinsep's contention that she could not be trusted was to a certain extent borne out by the erratic childishness of her behaviour. She was full of freakish pranks. For, delightful though she

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was and hard as her life had been, she undoubtedly had much of the character of the spoilt child. But of a spoilt child of genius. It was inevitable: she was so full of charm from her earliest years that no one could resist spoiling her. Discontent flooded over her. Sitting in Signor's studio on a dais amid the towering poetical pictures was as much as she expected of life. But she did resent Mrs. Prinsep's attitude. Nell behaved as a nymph who might escape from rules if they did not please her. This was by no means Mrs. Prinsep's view. On the contrary, the more opposition Nell put up, the more did she behave as if she was dealing with a person whose exclusive right to existence or at least consideration was due to her ability to fit into the pattern of Watts' life. Nell as Nell was not considered at all.

Nell was discontented, and she did not scruple to show it. She was married and yet no wife. 'My aunt described her as strikingly lovely', an account of Nell at this time runs, 'with brilliant eyes and very beautiful hair, but quite a schoolgirl and a decided tomboy. After luncheon, while my uncle and Watts paced to and fro in the garden talking, my aunt remained with Mrs. Prinsep and Ellen in the drawing-room. Suddenly the latter, with an air of supreme boredom, leant over the arm of the chair in which she was seated and, shaking her head to and fro, loosened the pins from her hair which tumbled about her shoulders like a cloak of shining gold. My aunt could only gaze in delight at the beauty of the girl as she sat there swaying her head gently from side to side, while the mass of shimmering hair shrouded her and swept the floor. But Mrs. Prinsep was horrified. "Ellen! Ellen!" she cried, "put up your hair instantly!" And Ellen, flashing a wrathful glance at her tormentor, grasped the waving mass of gold, coiled it carelessly upon her head and stabbing it with pins sat there looking lovelier than ever, a petulant, scolded child.'¹

Watts made no move. The best he could think of doing was to write confidences to his lady friends. No doubt he saw both sides of the case, but he had weakly allowed himself to be led into the affair and he felt incompetent to get out of it. Had he deeply loved Nell he might have dared to break his bonds and escape the clutches of Mrs. Prinsep. But he was not making much money and was probably as indebted to the Prinseps financially as he was for kindness. Nor was he deeply in love: in Italy he had tried to put life before art and it had not succeeded. He dared not risk it again. Art must come first. If he threw up his dependence on art for dependence upon a wayward fellow creature where might he not find himself? And so he went on painting Nell and worked at his imaginative pictures trying to shield himself from what he now began to think inevitable.

¹ A. M. W. Stirling, *Life's Little Day*, London 1924, p. 220.

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Watts had long grown accustomed to eyeing the world from his studio window. At first the studio was an escape from life, but soon it became life itself. Life and art as he knew it in the sheltered atmosphere of Little Holland House did seem to be one. There was no conflict, because the one was absolutely subservient to the other. But Nell Terry, whom he had regarded as the personification of art, suddenly brought to light the disturbing fact that what he thought was one and the same was in reality two things and in conflict. As Georgie Duff Gordon had said, he was living in an atmosphere of enchantment. Like a blow of fresh air Nell, with her tomboy ways and theatrical habits, threatened to knock down his sheltered world.

At first she had seemed to be the ideal person to inspire his art, now she seemed the most dreaded of beings, a wife who would cause him to waste his time in the trivialities of daily life. She wanted as much care in her way as he did. His imagination had made a perfect artistic being of her, but in the confinement of a contact, which nevertheless was never very intimate, his imagination could not take flight. She could still be a wayward child, but not his ideal, and it was the ideal he needed unless he was to disenchant his life. As the difficulties with Mrs. Prinsep increased and his time was lost in worry he came to regard Nell as a deceiver. She had come as the inspirer of his work, and he now considered her only as one who interfered with it. Nell and his dreams had been one, but now they were opposed. With a feeling of helpless fatality he saw he must choose one or the other.

Were he to choose his dreams his life would continue undisturbed. It would be a jolt and a scandal to send the child away. It would make him unhappy, but unhappiness was not an interference with his work. It might indeed turn out to be a stimulus. On the other hand, were he to choose Nell his work must surely suffer. He knew she was headstrong and would in all probability make him ill with worry. He had only to say to the Prinsep children that if they disobeyed him he would have a headache, but with Nell it might be very different. She had not received her schooling near the studio at Little Holland House. Moreover, it would mean breaking with the circle he had made. He would have to paint portraits to keep alive. Could his health stand it? Was it not his duty to himself, to his country and to art to remain true to the ideals he had set himself since boyhood? Above all he dared not leave the world of art and enchantment which had become his life. He kept almost making up his mind. Yet he could not bring himself to make a move. He tried to hide the realities of the situation from himself. He clothed himself in an artistic impenetrability. He did not understand the things his friends hinted to him. He dared not face the issue.

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The dénouement came suddenly. One evening Nell danced in as Cupid dressed in pink tights while the Prinseps were entertaining their distinguished guests.¹ Mrs. Prinsep declared it was not to be forgiven. Watts could not be expected in the eyes of the Little Holland House entourage to be subjected to the strain of such happenings. He had allowed himself to be moulded by the lady visitors into a tame prophet of art whose studio was scarcely less than a shrine. The incident was tragically incongruous with such a conception. Vulgarly was Watts' nightmare, and now his own wife was running downstairs dressed in pink tights.

Incongruous and dreadful though her conduct was, Watts was not without the justice to realise that she alone was not to blame. Had she been more satisfied in her desire to be his wife in fact as well as in letter, he saw, things might have gone better. He tormented himself with his stupidity in having married her, regretted his weakness in having failed to manage her and tortured himself over his unkindness in wishing to be rid of her. He realised that there was more to it than the coterie of lady admirers liked to make out. Was it for him to condemn little Nell? Were his motives as pure as his friends made out?

But condemned she was. The masterful women at Little Holland House settled it. How could Signor paint for posterity if he was for ever to be interrupted by the pranks of a spoilt child? There must be a separation. Watts, of course, was not expected to carry out any of the negotiations. His sensibilities were too delicate. He must be shielded at all costs. So the matter was prepared and set in motion without the painter having to decide between Nell and his dreams. Everything was decided for him about the separation as it had been decided about the marriage. He signed the documents and Nell was seen no more.

To Watts it was an unhappy incident that niggled at his conscience, but did not change his life. It was perhaps a saddening influence, for the separation meant a separation from the real world outside Little Holland House. Watts had stood for an instant between two worlds, and he had chosen the fictitious world his admirers had created for him. It did not seem like that to Watts when he looked back on it. It appeared to be simply the story of the inevitable collision between the world and high aspiration.

But to Nell it was a devastating blow from which she only gradually recovered. It was made worse by coming unexpectedly with terrible swiftness. She had grasped the reverence with which Watts was sur-

¹ In the nineties the incident was pleasingly embellished by the wits and prudes into Nell appearing naked from her bedroom and dancing on the dinner table before an assembly of confused and astonished bishops.

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rounded, and, indeed, it was that which had attracted her to him. But she did not realise how at variance her pranks were with the ideals that had been constructed around her. It never occurred to her that she could be separated from the new life she had learnt to love so much. She was married, and there was an end to the matter. When the separation was placed before her she was too thunderstruck even to be rebellious. To Watts the separation meant freedom from a stupid mistake. To Nell it meant that she had to return from the paradise of Little Holland House to the squalor and strife of boarding houses.

Deeply wounded, Nell left Little Holland House. For days she sat at the window of the hideous room her mother had prepared for her waiting for her Signor to fetch her back. But he never came. Gradually the numbness disappeared and she grew bitter. She felt that she had been unjustly excluded from a world which she had won and which was her due. She longed to return to the 'hornet's nest' which had been for the space of barely eighteen months her home. But it was not to be. In desperation she flew to the man who had stood for much the same values as Watts in the years just before her marriage when she had been acting in Bristol. But though Godwin was a versatile and gifted man he was also something of a villain.

Watts settled down to life without Nell with much the same outlook as before he had met her. An ideal had been smashed, but he expected little good to come to him. At all events there was no scandal. At Little Holland House the matter was passed over as something untoward that had occurred by error. Watts wrote to his friends explaining his motives and enacting vows of secrecy. By putting himself in the worst possible light he gained their sympathy. There was even an attempt to arrange a reconciliation, but when Nell disappeared to the country with Godwin it became impossible. So the marriage took on a tragic and romantic air. The devotees made the affair fit in with the rest of the conception they had created of Watts. It was just one of those things that happen to a gifted artist. The story, of course, had to be altered into the plural as the years went by and Ellen Terry was acknowledged to be a woman of genius and the greatest actress of the century. Her fame was the cause of some surprise at Little Holland House and Watts was genuinely astonished that little-naughty Nell should have turned out a person of consequence.¹

¹ Ellen Terry applied to Watts for a divorce which was made absolute in September 1877.

VI

FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

Sundays were the great days at Little Holland House when Mr. and Mrs. Prinsep were at home. Many a famous whiskered Victorian would drive out to Kensington and duck his head beneath the shabby thatch of the porch. Mrs. Prinsep would be everywhere, domineering, adjusting, reorganising and disappearing when she was most wanted. Thoby would talk from a comfortable chair in his slow rich voice. Lady Somers' austere beauty—it was austere despite Mrs. Twisleton's description—would be a focus of attention. Draped in the Grecian folds the Pattle cult demanded she received attention as by right. In summer there would be music on the lawns, Hallé playing, amid a tinkle of tea cups and earnest conversation. Maids in billowy white aprons passed to and fro carrying strawberries and cream to the guests. On the fringe of the scene would rise whoops of joy from the children on the garden swing. 'The conventional Sunday of the early Victorian era, was exchanged for the wit of cynics, the dreams of the inspired, the thoughts of the profoundest thinkers of the age. Throughout the sunny summer afternoons, under the shade of the fine old trees were placed big sofas and seats, picturesque in their gay coverings, and the desultory talk around the tea table was varied by games of bowls and croquet on the lawn beyond. But by and by, as the light faded and all who were mere visitors departed, those who belonged to the more intimate coterie of friends remained on to an impromptu dinner-party. The seats were carried indoors, the lights within gleamed in rosy cheerfulness, and conversation flowed into fresh delightful channels. "They talked", we are told, "of things that belonged to no date, their subjects would have interested men of any age."'¹

The parties were often highly unconventional. How could it be otherwise when Mrs. Cameron was asked? She had settled at Freshwater near Tennyson in 1860, but that did not prevent prolonged visits to Little Holland House. When, in 1865, she took up photography, she became a well-known menace at the parties. Squat, carelessly dressed, in a shabby gown which smelt of the acids she used in making her plates, she would parade the lawns, hunting for a sitter. Celebrities would be waylaid, captured, talked into silence, swathed in some outlandish costume and

¹ *Letters of the Hon. Mrs. Edward Twisleton*, pp. 124, 125.

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made to sit or stand for hours on end in excruciating postures. On one occasion, so the story went, Browning was suitably arrayed, posed, and left while the photographer went in search of her plates. She remained away three hours, but so fierce had been her admonitions not to move that the poet dared not change his posture. Tennyson, Herschel, Ruskin, fared no better, and Victorian history is the richer for their weakness. It was useless to protest and, however angry you might be, as she herself used to say, one could not help loving her in the end. Friendship would start by the gift of an India shawl. Another would follow in a few days. Then turquoise bracelets, tortoiseshell brooches, ivory bric-a-brac, ivory elephants would descend in showers. The embarrassed recipient would vaguely wonder when Mrs. Cameron's house would be empty. If she heard that any of her friends were expecting a baby the shower would turn into an avalanche which only the most extreme measures of impoliteness could stem.

Tennyson was the greatest lion of the place. Magnificent, gruff, rather touchy, with that unexpected streak of vulgar bonhomie which so much surprised his contemporaries, he would pace the lawns, a little knot of admirers admiring from a distance. On a visit to Little Holland House he wrote part of the *Idylls of the King*, walking slowly outside the drawing-room window. At this time Watts and he got on well. In fact three lines of the *Idylls* were suggested by the painter. Watts found him ideally monumental both in thought and appearance and would follow alongside him in unashamed hero-worship. Once they confided their religious beliefs to each other. To his joy Watts found Tennyson's views coincided exactly with his own.

Browning was another visitor who was always welcome, but not much liked. He was found to be so very lacking in the monumental! He would arrive faultlessly dressed with a rolled umbrella and depart afterwards to dine out with most unpoetical people. Watts summed him up by saying he had the most ordinary appearance of anyone he had met. Appearances at Little Holland House counted for a lot. A poet who went down far better was Sir Henry Taylor, the civil servant and creator of *Philip van Artevelde*. He was a magnificent-looking man with a wrinkled face and picturesque beard who looked as if he must be very wise. In his youth he had been intemperate to the extent of sitting up over-late and drinking too much tea. He had rapped old Lady Holland over the knuckles when she had spoken slightly of Wordsworth. And this was a feat. To the Little Holland House circle he seemed to be in the line of the great English poets. They were ravished by his detachment. When *Philip van Artevelde* failed as a drama he was neither pained nor humiliated. His self-esteem

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was so deep that he appeared to have none at all. On his visits to the Prinseps he would be followed about by his meek little wife whom he treated like a young sister. He would introduce her as his 'child wife'. She looked upon him with eyes bewildered at his wisdom—eyes that became only the more bewildered when he told her that he had been spoilt as a child and was a very selfish man.

Thackeray would often be over with his daughters. George Eliot and her husband were also asked and occasionally accepted. Representing politics there was Mr. Gladstone, not perhaps quite in his element, portentous and compelling. Disraeli would come, too, dressed in regency style, all rings, ringlets and colour. Naturally there were few church-men; but Frederick Dennison Maurice, the leader of the Christian Socialists, braving the prejudice felt in Conservative circles against Little Holland House, would enjoy the parties. His was a mind that was nourished by earnest discussion. Watts, who knew nothing of theology, took him very much to his heart because he thought Maurice denied everlasting punishment. Everlasting torment had been a bogey with Watts ever since he had listened to the Evangelical preachers in his boyhood. As a matter of fact, Watts, with most of his untheological contemporaries, totally misunderstood Maurice's position. Carlyle thought it absurd that a man should be damned in two minutes, while Ruskin cryptically called Maurice 'by nature puzzle-headed, and, though in a beautiful manner, *wrong-headed*; while his clear conscience and keen affection made him egoistic.' Nevertheless, for all his earnest puzzled look, or perhaps because of it, Watts considered him to be a man of importance and his portrait was painted for the Palace of Fame.

One of Mrs. Prinsep's sisters, Sophie Dalrymple, also came to the parties. She was all grace and charm, and first to nickname Watts Signor. It seemed just right to Mrs. Prinsep. George or Fred was impossibly coarse! And so Signor he remained all his life. Aunt Sophie managed to shine on the days when there were no guests. For there were the dull days to be got through at Little Holland House. 'Perhaps we were all round the dinner table', her nephew wrote, 'in the lower dining-room—uncle Thoby thinking about his work, passing his hand over his eyes and silent; Signor not very well and silent; Aunt Sara occupied giving all sorts of directions in a low tone to a servant; the young people awed and silent. Suddenly there was a rustle of silks, a lovely vision appeared—for Aunt Sophie wandered in dressed in a gown of some rich colour, all full of crinkles. Aunt Sara would scold her a little for being late, and she would put her head on one side and answer with a little bit of pathetic humour; and before she had been amongst us three minutes, the whole party was

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laughing and talking.¹ Aunt Sophie was in fact a great addition to the Sunday affairs, when she could be relied upon to cheer the unpopular guest, or make the nervous feel easy.

The Hollands were not often at Little Holland House. In the fifties there had been a dispute over the garden. It was put right by a dinner at Holland House. 'She has been so good-humoured', Lord Holland wrote of Mrs. Prinsep, 'and always ready to be friendly and neighbourly in little matters, that I was anxious to prevent any ill-will about the garden.' Watts, however, took the matter more to heart. 'What a foolish position poor Watts is in, with "his peculiar disposition"', Holland wrote.² The old intimacy was practically over when Holland died in 1859. Watts continued to see Lady Holland, but his visits were more acts of politeness than friendship. They would chat about the past and wonder at the intimacy they once had known.

Another friend who came to the parties was Tom Hughes, Mrs. Nassau Senior's brother. He was an earnest, devout, unintellectual Christian. Under the influence of F. D. Maurice he had become one of the foremost 'Christian Socialists', and played an important part in the foundation of the Co-operative Movement. No one suspected him of genius, and it was a great surprise to the Little Holland House clique—as indeed it was to the author—when *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was a success. In middle life he tried to put his socialist ideals into practice on a model estate in Tennessee, which caused him great trouble and the settlers bitter disappointment. Old Mrs. Hughes, his mother, whose gooseberry wine Watts enjoyed, was shipped out there and lived to a great age.

The rise of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood brought a new influx of genius to the parties. Ruskin, of course, was an old friend from the Charles Street days.³ Of the Brotherhood Rossetti was the most notable. Watts had got to know him through Millais and Holman Hunt. Neither of the latter much enjoyed the atmosphere at Little Holland House. To Millais it was too unreal, and no doubt Holman Hunt found it subtly vicious. But Rossetti in the late fifties was a frequent visitor. He was 'at this time a plump little man who generally wore a plum coloured frock coat. He was bald for his age, and his beard was cut à la Shakespeare, indeed there was a strong likeness to the great bard, save that the eyes were the eyes of an Italian, grave and dark with the bistre tinge round them which some great lady—I think Carlyle's Lady Ashburton—said "Looked as if they had been put in with dirty fingers." His voice was singularly sweet and caressing, and he talked in a kind of melodious chant.'⁴

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 156.

² Ilchester, p. 407.

³ See Appendix I. Letters from Ruskin.

⁴ Val Prinsep, *Magazine of Art*, Feb. 1904, p. 167.

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Watts had a high opinion of Rossetti. He went so far as to say that of all the men he had ever met Rossetti was the most remarkable for genius. But he found his pictures lacked a proper understanding of anatomy. His poetry, Watts considered, was superior. But Watts could not understand Rossetti. The portrait Watts painted of him is illuminating. The intention was evidently to ennoble the poet, as Watts had done in his other portraits. But Rossetti was by no means a typical Victorian—a genius he might be, but noble, never. By attempting to make of him the simple elevated great man whom he understood, Watts entirely deprived him of character. It was not to be wondered at that Rossetti disliked the portrait so much that he asked for it back.

Rossetti had got to know an undergraduate admirer at Oxford and he brought him to Little Holland House. 'One day', as Edward Burne-Jones described it in old age, 'Gabriele took me out in a cab—it was a day he was rich and so we went in a hansom, and we drove and drove until I thought we should arrive at the setting sun—and he said: "You must know these people, Ned; they are remarkable people: you will see a painter there, he paints a queer sort of pictures about God and Creation":' Burne-Jones had expected a frightening time. 'I am going with Rossetti', he wrote to his father, 'to be introduced to a lot of swells who'll frighten me to death and make me keep close to his side all the time.'¹ Val Prinsep, the eldest son who had just reached manhood and who had taken up art as his profession, wrote of the visit: 'This time Rossetti was accompanied by a younger man, who he declared was the greatest genius of the age—a shy, fair young man, with mild grey-blue eyes and straight light hair which was apt to straggle over his well-developed forehead—who spoke in an earnest impressive manner when he did speak, which was not often: on this, his first visit to my father's house, he did not much impress me.'² It was not long, however, before Burne-Jones did begin to impress the Little Holland House coterie. When Tennyson was staying at Little Holland House he overheard Ruskin in another room exclaim: 'Jones, you are gigantic.' Ever afterwards the poet when in jocular mood would call him 'Gigantic Jones.'³

According to Val Prinsep it was on his first visit with Burne-Jones to Little Holland House that Rossetti proposed to decorate the Union debating hall at Oxford. He asked Val if he would do one of the panels.

"But", I stammered, "I can't paint or draw."

"That makes no difference—there's one of my friends going to join us who has never painted anything, but you'll see he'll do a stunning thing."

¹ *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, i, p. 159.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 160.

³ M. S. Watts, i, p. 170.

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Now you come to Oxford and see what you have to do, and don't be afraid." The friend who was to make his first effort at painting was William Morris.¹ They were joined by Roddam Spencer Stanhope, Arthur Hughes and others. Morris afterwards visited Little Holland House, but found the atmosphere artificial and tried to persuade his friends not to go.

The work at the Union was carried out in the highest of spirits. Val was driven to the work-house when he asked the cab driver to go to the Union. And there were practical jokes all day long mostly directed against 'Topsy Morris'. They found 'Swinburne of Balliol' an amusing companion. 'Rossetti', wrote Val Prinsep, 'was the planet round which we revolved, we copied his very way of speaking. . . . What fun we had in that Union! What jokes! What roars of laughter!'²

Watts at first gave himself the credit of having introduced Val to Pre-Raphaelitism. 'I have conscientiously abstained', he wrote, 'from inoculating him with any of my views or ways of thinking, and have plunged him into the Pre-Raphaelite Styx. I don't mean to say that I held the fine young baby of six feet two by the heel, or wish to imply the power of moulding his opinions at my pleasure; but, to continue my figure, I found him loitering on the banks and gave him a good shove, and now his gods are Rossetti, Hunt and Millais—to whose elbows more power. The said Master Val—commonly called Buzz by reason of his hair, which is this sort of thing—[here follows a scribble of the bristling hair]—has made most satisfactory progress and has distinguished himself by painting a picture at Oxford fourteen feet long with figures ten feet high!—a muffin!'³

The whole letter is very much in the style of the Brotherhood. The drawing of Val is typical. Indeed, Watts himself seems to have succumbed (for a moment) to the high spirits. But later he became anxious at Rossetti's dominating influence and wrote to Ruskin about it, who promised to talk to Val.⁴

The aims of the Brotherhood were definitely opposed to the Grand Manner in art. Rossetti's ideas of mural decoration were distinctly mediaeval and not at all in line with Watts' views on the subject, as the Union paintings clearly show. It was probably the shape and position of Watts' fresco at Lincoln's Inn that called forth Rossetti's admiration. The dining hall where it was painted is a Neo-Gothic building with a pent roof and the fresco is skied in the triangular space made by the roof over the High Table. And in almost all matters connected with art Watts and the Pre-

¹ *Magazine of Art*, Feb. 1904, pp. 167, 168.

² *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, i, pp. 163, 164.

³ M. S. Watts, i, p. 172.

⁴ See Appendix I.

FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

Raphaelites were starting from opposite poles. To them realism was a main tenet of faith, to Watts, as to all Grand Mannerists, realism was a low form of art. Nevertheless, the Pre-Raphaelite movement was more a freemasonry of friends than a dogmatic institution. And Watts' connection with so many of the later brotherhood undoubtedly helped to bring him much more before the public than he had been. Gradually, as the Pre-Raphaelites gained control of the organs of art criticism, his pictures received more consideration.

In 1850 his pictures were badly hung at the Academy and the critics wrote condescendingly: 'The conception [of the Good Samaritan] is not enhanced by a certain boldness and vigour of drawing without correctness—but there is a mastery in the conduct of its colour which proves the painter not to have been idle when residing amid the treasures of early art.'¹ From the tone one might have supposed Watts to have been a beginner. But he was thirty-three at the time and had exhibited his first pictures at the Academy thirteen years before. In 1859, after a lapse of seven years when he exhibited nothing, there is already a considerable change in tone. 'I cannot criticise', wrote Ruskin, 'my friend Mr. Watts' picture *Isabella*; it is full of beauty and thoughtfulness. I have no doubt that he knows its faults better than I do, and they are so slight that the public ought not to see them, but to admire it with all their hearts.'²

William Richmond, who first met Watts at this time, tells the same story. The tide which had been flowing against him since the unhappy days in Charles Street was at last on the turn. He was beginning to be appreciated. 'Drilling on Wimbledon Common in 1859', Richmond wrote, 'I first encountered G. F. Watts, England's great epic poet-painter. He was on horseback, having ridden from Little Holland House to be present at our skirmishing then taking place on the high level of the Common near the windmill. Watts had liked some early work of mine, and spoke kindly to me. He looked very splendid; his beard, which was worn long, was very silky, and was blown about in a fascinating fashion first over one shoulder and then the other.

'At that date Watts was not much before the public; he had exhibited little; when he did, the R.A.'s of that day treated him badly, hung his pictures ill, and some of them were venomous. But Watts had his public, a select one, and did not certainly find any place among the commercial set, he was an artist for artists, a poet for poets.'³

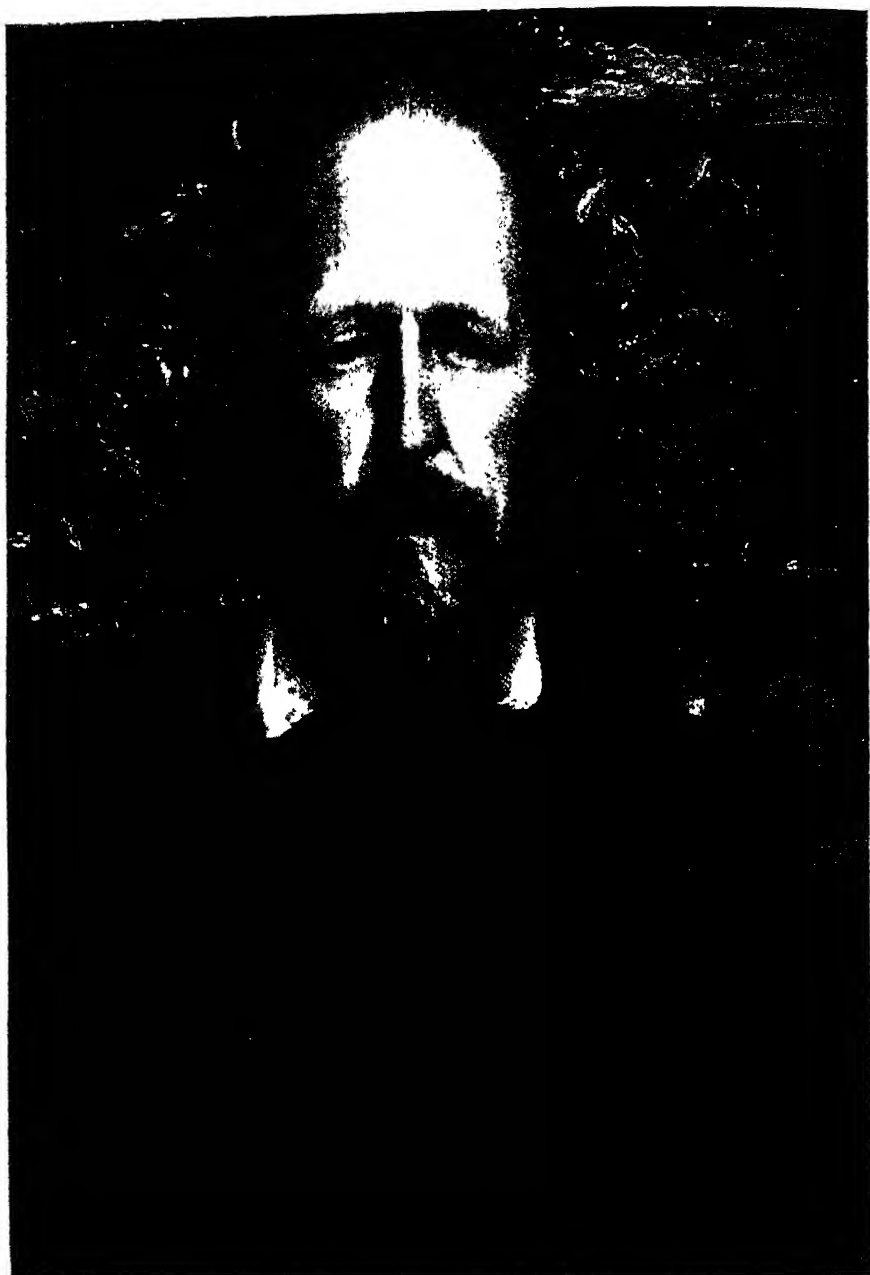
¹ *Atbenaeum*, May 1850, p. 509.

² *Ruskin: Complete Works*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, London, 1904, Vol. XIV, pp. 239, 240.

³ *Richmond Papers*, ed. A. W. M. Stirling, p. 167.



15. JULIA CAMERON



16. LORD TENNYSON

1863

FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

(The drilling Richmond refers to was in preparation against Napoleon III's threatened invasion. Most of the well-known artists were volunteers. Morris and Rossetti were most incompetent, Leighton on the other hand was a tower of efficiency!)

William Michael Rossetti wrote an interesting criticism of *Sir Galahad* in 1862, which shows how Watts was generally regarded by the Brotherhood. Sir Galahad was very much a Pre-Raphaelite subject. 'There is fine style in *Sir Galahad*, and the character of the Pure Knight who was engaged in the adventure of the Holy Grail is expressed as far as it goes; yet Mr. Watts' tendency to idealism interferes, to our judgment, with his success in subjects of this kind, where an ideal of character has to be presented in the person of an individual man. We would ask for more of the individual and less of the impersonal ideal, for an unity of impression *underlying* the treatment, not constituting it. It may sound paradoxical to say that an ideal is better adapted to actual than to ideal subjects. We think, nevertheless, that the affirmative might be maintained in several instances, and in that of Mr. Watts, his great mastery over beauty and feeling in portraiture seems to us to be a case in point. In portraiture he is still ideal, as far as the form of art allows him to be so; but this controls the tendency, and prevents it from passing into vagueness. Ideal tendency in ideal subject is always in danger of losing itself "as Water does in Water".'¹

William Michael Rossetti was not always so much to the point. He scarcely noticed *Choosing* which was exhibited in 1864. 'Among minor successes', he started the sentences which do for a criticism. The *Athenaeum* for once was appreciative. 'The tone and richness of the flesh painting in the work surpass many previous ones by the artist', wrote the critic.² His reputation was growing, but often he was praised for his bad work and criticised for his good. In 1867 he sent two pictures to the Academy, the fine *Lamplight study, Herr Joachim*, and the conventional *May*, a girl at prayer. The *Joachim* was found by the *Athenaeum* to be in 'too low a key' while the other picture was highly commended.

In the sixties Watts was not generally popular. For the most part the critics, with a few Philistine exceptions, admired without much warmth. Watts was not separately criticised in W. M. Rossetti's *Fine Art* which came out in 1867, though older men like Maclise, Frith and Doyle, and the younger men like Leighton, are mentioned in individual sections. Nevertheless, among the younger generation there was a great admiration for Watts. It is significant that his works and aims are discussed in the *Fine Art Gossip* of the *Athenaeum* in the sixties. Young Swinburne (who

¹ W. M. Rossetti: *Fraser's Town and Country Magazine*, 1862, Vol. 66, p. 71.

² *Athenaeum*, May 7, 1864, p. 651.

FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

was to be the link connecting Little Holland House with the aestheticism of the nineties) straight from Balliol wrote passionately of the *Wife of Pygmalion*, a picture inspired by the Arundel bust which Watts and Newton brought to light at Oxford. It was exhibited at the Academy in 1868. 'The soft severity of perfect beauty might serve alike for woman or statue, flesh or marble; but the eyes have opened already upon love, with a tender and grave wonder, her curving ripples of hair seem just warm from the touch and the breath of the goddess, moulded and quickened by lips and hands diviner than her sculptor's. So it seems a Greek painter must have painted women, when Greece had mortal pictures fit to match her imperishable statues. Her shapeliness and state, her sweet majesty and amorous chastity, recall the supreme Venus of Milos. In this "translation" of a Greek statue into an English picture, no less than in the bust of Clyte [also exhibited by Watts this year], we see how in the hands of a great artist painting and sculpture may become as sister arts indeed, yet without invasion or confusion; how, without any fixed alliance of form and colour, a picture may share the gracious grandeur of a statue, a statue may catch something of the subtle bloom of beauty proper to a picture.'¹

After an attack on Millais which ends: 'Surely a painter who has done things so noble will not always be content to take for his battle cry: "Philistia be thou glad of me"', he returned to Watts. Of the *Clyte* he wrote: 'Not imitative, not even assimilative of Michelangelo's manner it yet by some vague and ineffable quality brings to mind his work rather than any Greek sculptor's. There is the same intense and fiery sentiment, the same grandeur of device, the same mystery of tragedy. The colour and passion of this work are the workman's own. Never was a divine legend translated into diviner likeness. Large, deep bosomed, superb in arm and shoulder, as should be the woman growing from flesh into flower through a godlike agony, from fairness of body to fullness of flower, large-leaved and broad of blossom, splendid and sad—yearning with all the life of her lips and breasts after the receding light and the removing love—this is the Clyte indeed whom sculptors and poets have loved for her love of the Sun, the God. The bitter sweetness of the dividing lips, the mighty mould of the rising breasts, the splendour of her sorrow is divine: divine the massive weight of carven curls bound up behind, the heavy straying flakes of un-filleted hair below; divine the clear cheeks and low full forehead, the strong round neck made for the arms of a god only to clasp and bend down to their yoke. We seem to see the lessening sunset that she sees, and fears too soon to watch that stately beauty slowly suffer change and die into flower,

¹ Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868, pt. ii, by A. C. Swinburne, pp. 31, 32.

FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

that solid sweetness of body sink into petal and leaf. Sculpture such as this has actual colour enough without need to borrow of an alien art."¹

But such effusions were rare and were indeed rather repulsive to the average Victorian. Aestheticism was as yet only in the bud. But there were plenty of Philistines. Bernard Cracroft writing on the Academy of 1869 found *The Return of the Dove* 'painful' because the bird was obviously worn out and would never reach the ark, 'a faint blotch', as he called it. According to the critic's calculations, indeed, the ark was almost forty miles from the poor creature whose 'very feathers are all tumbling to pieces.' 'In the Bible the Dove got home, and in Mr. Watts' picture she never will.' And that decided the matter. His dislike of *Una and the Red Cross Knight* was as practical and masculine as could be. 'Will anybody tell me what he sees in the *Red Cross Knight and Una* that he should like to look at it again? . . . I should be very sorry to look like the Red Cross Knight in *Una* if it was vouchsafed me; and if I were riding by her, I should care very little for *Una*. Indeed, politeness permitting, I should ask her "to sit up" and look less of an idiot."²

Watts was becoming the centre of an exclusive and highly educated group of aesthetes. He had not yet produced his large popular moralities, and his appeal was still primarily artistic. The moral and emotional overtones were still in the background. One has only to compare *Fata Morgana* with *Love Triumphant* to see the difference. As with so many Victorians, Watts' popular success signalised a decline in his art, and that did not happen till the eighties. As yet he was admired by the discriminating few. This position is well described by a writer in 1870. 'Both these works, [*Fata Morgana* and *Daphne*] so remarkable for that classic sweetness and perfection of female form which not even Millais has attained, require careful and loving study. Their beauty will not reveal itself otherwise, for they are not pictures painted to stimulate vapid and vacant curiosity or to pander to cheap and coarse sentiment. Too entirely great to be anything but "caviare to the general", they will be prized by a few elect souls more than any other work in the Academy this year."³

The sixties and early seventies were the most fruitful years of Watts' life. Before that time he had not reached the perfection of his technique, and his powers were vitiated by the will-o'-the-wisp of fresco. After the eighties he was in artistic matters a tired man. His pictures were popular but they were also facile and sentimental. His maturity really coincided with the heyday of Little Holland House under the Prinseps.

¹ Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868, pt. ii, by A. C. Swinburne, pp. 35, 36.

² *Fortnightly Review*, July 1869, pp. 51, 52.

³ Richard Herne Shepherd: Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1870, p. 29.

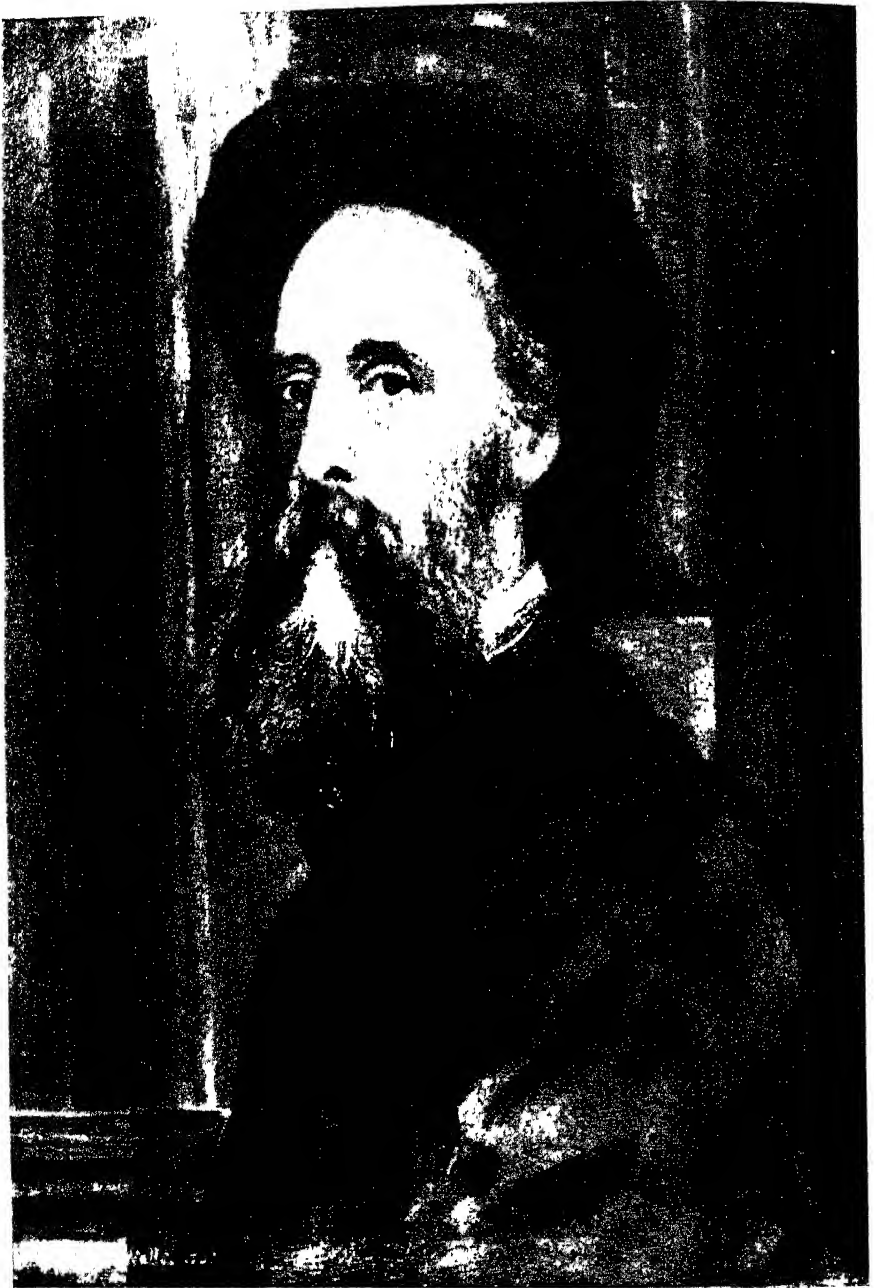
FRIENDS, PRE-RAPHAELITES, CRITICS

But the lease that Thoby had drawn up with Lord Holland was rapidly running out. There had been a gentleman's agreement with Lady Holland that the lease could be renewed. But she was hard pressed for money and found she could not implement her word. Watts was indignant as he had built a studio on the understanding that the Prinseps would be allowed to remain for the rest of their lives. But it was not to be, and the Prinseps had to look for a new home. In 1875 Little Holland House was pulled down and with it went the Pattle coterie, the music of Hallé, the tinkle of teacups on the lawn, the earnest conversation, the wit of the Victorian cynics.



17. CHOOSING. PORTRAIT OF ELLEN TERRY

1864



18. SELF-PORTRAIT

1867

VII

SIX MELBURY ROAD

THE break-up of the Little Holland House menage meant a great change in Watts' life. So many of his activities were bound up with the Prinseps, so many of his friends had been theirs first that a complete separation was impossible. He needed to be under somebody's care. Life alone was terrifying because without help in everyday matters he would be brought up against the ordinary situations with which he felt he was unable to deal. Tennyson settled the place to which they should move. It was to be near him at Freshwater. It was a good choice, for the Isle of Wight was already well known to them through Mrs. Cameron, and it was not long before they decided to build about half a mile from Farringford. There was, however, the question of money. Thoby had always had a large income, but Mrs. Prinsep was not economical, and they had spent very freely on entertainment. Thoby found he had not the necessary capital. When this was explained to Watts, he immediately decided to build the house with his own money and thus repay his debt to their kindness. In this way The Briary came into being.

It was a sad leave-taking of the old house, but it was in a ruinous condition, and had it not been pulled down it would probably have fallen of itself. It was low and unhealthily damp. A friend of Lady Holland's who visited the house and gardens wrote that the place should be pulled down. 'I also went into the Farm Yard', he continued, 'and a dirtier or more squalid spot I never saw, even in Ireland. All this being swept away will be an inestimable advantage. . . . The fact is that Little H^d H and the Farm are so discreditable and ugly that nothing can be worse.'¹ Val Prinsep had never thought it good for Watts' health. But it meant the end of an era, and the houses that replaced it were far from beautiful.

Thoby wrote a copy of verses to mark the occasion, which admirably display the fortitude, cheerfulness and sanity of the old man. He was already eighty.

*'Where now five villas their broad fronts present
And to the world are offered at a rent,
Stood heretofore a nest of gables, built
Each to supply a want as it was felt;
And shaded lawns, mown carefully and rolled,
Provided pastime for the young and old;*

¹ Ilchester: Holland House 1820-1900, p. 446.

SIX MELBURY ROAD

*Here grew to manhood youths of honoured name,
And here their mentor Watts achieved his fame.
Well might we elders in our hearts rejoice
That all things prospered in our home of choice.
Its demolition many much regret,
For there are many who can ne'er forget
The genial spirit in which friends here met.
In lasting memory of days so dear
A friendly hand has placed these tablets here:
We greet the vision and suppress the tear.¹*

Life at The Briary, however, differed little from life at Little Holland House. It was in the depths of the country, a three-storeyed building in red and white, small enough to be a cottage, and yet provided with a comfortable verandah and two colossal studios for Watts. Needless to say, Signor did not assert his right of ownership. The household continued to revolve round Mrs. Prinsep. There was still the Pattle uproar, the same untidiness and lack of method, still the visitors and the innumerable young people, cousins and grandchildren and those whom the warm-hearted Prinseps had adopted. Only now Thoby was blind and Mrs. Prinsep more tyrannical. It was not an altogether ideal atmosphere for children. Sometimes it was overcharged with Pattle emotion. On such occasions they would take refuge in Signor's studio whom they treated with great condescension. 'Signor, you paint very well', a little girl would say when she thought him too diffident, or 'Signor, you know you are vain, you know you are', when he showed signs of getting into an inflated mood. When Mrs. Prinsep could not find a drawing master and suggested that Signor should teach them, the children were indignant, and they called out, 'But Granny, Signor can't draw, he can only paint.'

This is how a child of the household, later Lady Troubridge, described her feelings about Watts. 'Darling Signor, no one had ever talked to me as he did, taking all the big facts of life and dressing them up in rainbow words like the magical colours on his palette. He taught us values, the beauty of beauty, the joy of joy, the marvel of heroic deeds. No wonder we loved him. Even to write of him brings a piercing sweetness. Yet with all his gentleness, he was impersonal; no one could boast of being his favourite, though it was understood he loved Blanche best;² but what he loved was the youth in all of us . . .

¹ *Lady Troubridge: Memories and Reflections*, London, 1925, p. 15.

² Blanche Clogstoun, cousin of the Prinseps. Watts became her legal guardian, though Mrs. Prinsep looked after her.

SIX MELBURY ROAD

'I can see him now, standing in the quiet studio, a slight figure in grey, with shirt of silk and pleated frill, and a tie of red ribbon, thin face and neatly trimmed pointed beard, and his quiet voice articulating very clearly.

'He lived entirely by rule to preserve his delicate health, practising a strict diet that anticipated many of the régimes of the present day. . . . He got up at three o'clock in summer, and when the light began in winter, and painted all day until the light failed. After that novels were read to him, and he loved to be read or played to; but, except for some writing, he kept his eye-sight solely for his work.'¹

• Tennyson was often over with a book to read out loud. He was not much attracted by Watts at this time. The painter was too much of an aesthete for Tennyson's taste. But he never failed to enjoy Thoby's frank and genial company. Tennyson was also very fond of taking the young girls out for walks. After the first introductory outing the young ladies would walk over to Farringford, and wait in the silent hall. Not a sound would be heard. The very servants would seem to be moving about in stealthy quietness. Outside, the laurels almost met and trembled mournfully in the wind or kept the sun from invading the great man's privacy. Then he would come into the hall with his long cloak flapping round him, his broad hat on his head, a great stick in his hand, and a couple of dogs at his heels.

But the nearest neighbours were the Camerons at Dimbola. Old age had done nothing to stale Mrs. Cameron's eccentricities. As had become established custom, visitors with promising faces were still kidnapped on the ferry from the mainland and brought to the cottage for lunch and a sitting. Stinking of photographic acid, her loose dress covered with brown stains and burns, Mrs. Cameron was for ever bustling in and out of The Briary, greatly adding to the already high state of tension created by Mrs. Prinsep.

She was as imperious as ever, no matter with whom she had to deal. Tennyson had cause to fear her, for she had forced him to be vaccinated against his will. Perhaps a little jealous, he once chaffed her for the praise she bestowed on Henry Taylor and said gruffly: 'I don't see what you mean by his extraordinary beauty—why he has a smile like a fish.' She retorted instantly, 'Only when the Spirit of the Lord moved on the face of the waters, Alfred.'² She alone dared affront the laureate. Three Americans had crossed the Atlantic to see the great man, but were refused admittance. Sorrowfully they applied to Mrs. Cameron. Without hesitation and almost without a word they were marched to Farringford. In through the door, through the silent hall and, finally, into the great man's study she

¹ *Troubridge*, pp. 23, 24.

² M. S. Watts, i, p. 205.

SIX MELBURY ROAD

sailed. 'Alfred,' she cried, 'these gentlemen have come from afar to see the British *Lion*, and behold a *Bear*!'¹

At Freshwater Mrs. Cameron's word was law. Mr. Cameron once regretted that there were so many vegetables in their garden. Orders were sent out secretly 'to friends and to henchmen that this must be remedied; but on no account could the work be done when Mr. Cameron wished to walk in the garden, which was every day. In cartloads, therefore, turf was brought and laid down out of view, and as soon as Mr. Cameron had gone to bed, [Mrs. Cameron's] army was marshalled and, by lantern-light, the vegetable garden was swept away; so when Mr. Cameron looked out next morning a fine grass lawn spread out before his astonished eyes.'²

While Watts was at The Briary he and all Freshwater were astounded to hear that the Camerons intended to go to Ceylon. Mr. Cameron, for years almost an invalid, had lain in complete retirement, his long white hair draped round him and arrayed in a crimson dressing-gown. Visitors would occasionally see him on his walk in the garden, or hear him comment on his wife's photographs from his bedroom. But for the most part he had slept and read and ruminated on the utilitarian philosophy which he had learnt from Bentham. Then one day, suddenly, after his walk in the garden he had borrowed a coat from his son and strolled down to the sea-shore. There he had been filled with a longing to return to Ceylon where four of his sons were living.

The idea was no sooner communicated to Mrs. Cameron than it was put into practice. Dimbola was soon in turmoil. Packing cases were everywhere. Every contingency that could not arise on the journey was thought out. Telegrams poured in, and telegrams poured out. Freshwater came in troops to say goodbye. At Southampton astonished porters were presented with photographs of Carlyle or of Madonna Mary, her model and parlour-maid. 'I have no money left,' she had cried, 'but take this instead as a remembrance.'

But pleasant as The Briary was, Watts soon began to realise that he could not live in the Isle of Wight indefinitely. He was out of touch with sitters. He therefore bought land on the site of Little Holland House and built a new Little Holland House,³ No. 6 Melbury Road. It was not a graceful building—a friend of Lady Holland's called it a fantastic erection—but it had comfortable rooms. There were large studios, too, and an immense shed in the garden for storing canvases. There were no spare bedrooms, which Watts said was 'to avoid complications', presumably in the shape of flattering women admirers whom he would not otherwise

¹ Troubridge, p. 37.

² M. S. Watts, i, p. 206.

³ Henceforth called Little Holland House.

SIX MELBURY ROAD

have managed to turn from the house. By February, 1876, 6 Melbury Road or new Little Holland House was ready to receive him. The break with the Prinseps was softened by Mrs. Prinsep sending her own house-keeper, Emma, with strict instructions about his health and diet.

Nevertheless life at 6 Melbury Road was quite different from what he had been used to. There was no household of children on whom he could rely for relaxation, and there was not so much coming and going of guests. He had visitors but they came, with a few exceptions, to admire his pictures rather than to see the man himself. He had been a hermit in the midst of the Prinsep hubbub. He was now more of a recluse than ever.

He was not to be quite solitary for long, however. The house next door was taken by a rich and admiring woman—Mrs. Russell Barrington—who was very keen on making artistic friendships. Almost all Watts' women friends had been able, and Mrs. Barrington was in many respects, if not in achievement, the ablest. Certainly she has left the most detached account of Watts. The soaring romanticism of his nature lacked anchorage without the thoughtful and realistic discernment of a clever woman. And this Mrs. Barrington gave him.

She was a vigorous, intelligent, intuitive, but rather unsubtle person married to a husband of inferior powers. She had first met Watts on one of his infrequent visits to Rossetti's studio. Always on the look-out for celebrities, she carefully noted his figure. 'Habited in a long sealskin coat, it was small but in no wise insignificant—on the contrary, it was distinguished in appearance. The face was handsome, with a serious countenance suggesting a latent weariness and melancholy hidden under a crust of reserve.'¹ It was through their mutual friend, Mrs. Nassau Senior, that they met again just before Little Holland House was pulled down. Mr. Barrington had shyly refused to get out of the carriage, not finding that he had anything to say to his wife's artist friend. Then at Freshwater quite a friendship had developed. They would saunter about the lanes together, Watts dressed in a grey felt hat and a loose cape that flew out behind him in the wind.

Back in London, at the new house, Watts felt the need of a confidante. He was growing lonely. He hinted that perhaps Mrs. Barrington might be able to help him to carry out his designs. Finally he wrote suggesting that the Barringtons should take the house next door. 'I don't know', he wrote to Mrs. Barrington, 'but what you might help me with some advantage to yourself, because anyone who does help me must go profoundly into the matter [High Art?], and if real study has any charms for you, why, perhaps, you might be willing to undergo some stiff and stern application; but, I can tell you, help to me in the works I have proposed to my-

¹ Mrs. Russell Barrington: *G. F. Watts, Reminiscences*, London, 1905, p. 2.

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self, and indeed have plunged into, would be no child's play.¹ It was just the sort of offer to attract Mrs. Barrington. It could not have been couched in more tempting language. She wanted to enter the artistic world, and with Watts as her friend she seemed to be entering the highest precincts under the most favourable auspices.

It was the beginning of an intimate friendship. Mrs. Barrington's work was, indeed, of the hardest, though hardly what she can have expected. It was Watts' intention to use her as a mirror in which he could see his own reflection. He displayed to her the full variety of his nature. On one occasion when they were standing together on the lawn he exclaimed: 'I am nothing. Oh! you will find out I am nothing! I have no genius—no facility: any one could do better work if they sacrificed everything to it as I do! One thing alone I possess, and I never remember the time I was without it—an aim towards the highest, the best, and a burning desire to reach it. If I were asked to choose whether I would like to do something good, as the world judges popular art, and receive personally great credit for it, or as an alternative, to produce something which should rank with the very best, taking a place with the art of Pheidias or Titian, with the highest poetry and the most elevating music, and remain unknown as the perpetrator of the work, I should choose the latter.'²

Little notes would be carried next door by the servant with a thought or an idea upon art scribbled upon it. It was partly a wish to discover what he was, and partly loneliness that sustained this strange friendship. 'I feel', he wrote, 'around me the tramp of armed men, and the hurry of others hastening to claim the right to live, and feel, I can't tell you what a desire to be among them somehow. If I had the singer's gift I would lend them some aid, but, as it is, I almost feel too small to live, and very often life is a positive pain to me for want of mental lungs powerful enough to breathe the strong air. What a nuisance it is to be less than oneself!'³ It was this strong air that he had never dared to breathe, and in his loneliness the confined motionless air of his own personality seemed to be stifling him. And yet whenever he stirred forth he found that in society he wasted his energy in appearances. He ends one letter to Mrs. Barrington: 'I should like to go into a monastery.' In another he shows his innate lack of confidence. Mrs. Barrington was to have brought a friend to his studio, having been to see Burne-Jones on the way. By this arrangement Watts thought that his pictures would be a come-down after the Burne-Jones. But later on with great repentance he writes: 'I find it will be more convenient to me if you take Burne-Jones' studio first. After all it is but vanity which makes me wish to come first and escape comparison, a base sentiment which should not

¹ Mrs. Russell Barrington: *G. F. Watts*, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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be encouraged. What is, is, and one should not desire to make it seem to be other.¹

There arose out of the friendship a sort of ritual. A gate was cut in the hedge, as Watts found the peasant smocks he wore for his work were considered odd in the streets of Kensington. And through this gate the little notes were passed. He came through it on his visits to Mrs. Barrington, and she made use of it on her visits to him in the evenings. 'Evening after evening the same thing happened. I would go in first, Mr. Barrington generally joining us a little later. In the winter months Watts was in his sitting-room, always in the same claret-coloured velvet armchair reading. The servant having opened the door and announced me, the book was thrown aside, the spectacles taken off, he would rub his eyes with his fingers and almost invariably begin with, "Well, what's the news?"' . . . The most deeply interesting news was naturally how the work got on, how certain experiments with colours had answered, or what pictures had been seen. Watts had what he called "field days" with certain pigments. One day it would be the effect of burnt sienna rubbed over a ground of light red; another, the effect of ultramarine over raw umber, or various other combinations of warm or cool tint, always simple colours, generally earths. How deeply interesting were all these experiments and the different results. . . . Discussions over the particular discoveries of the day always ended by his saying, when the servant came in to lay the cloth for his evening meal, "I hope I have improved *Love and Death* (or mentioning whichever picture he had been chiefly working on). "I may have spoilt it—I don't know! Come and see!" or some words to this effect. Then he would take the flat candle-stick that was invariably placed for him on the end of the book-shelf near the door, a paper spill lying in it. Lighting it from the fire, he put the unburnt half on to the moulding above the fireplace. Night after night for all these years this process was gone through in precisely the same manner. I would often warn him that he might burn down his house some day through the little economy, and he would generally answer in the same words, "I am very careful; I don't like waste—even of half a spill!" Then, candle in hand, I following, he would go into the passage up the five steps to the double doors of the studio, through the enclosed passage between them, where, from a mysterious little window, we would look down into the sculpture studio on to the giant horse and its rider—*Hugh Lupus*² first, and later, *Physical Energy*³—huge ghost-

¹ Mrs. Russell Barrington: *G. F. Watts*, p. 62.

² Equestrian statue commissioned by the Duke of Westminster. Finished 1884.

³ Equestrian statue not finished till 1904. In Kensington Gardens and on Cecil Rhodes' grave.

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like apparitions as seen by the faint light of the solitary candle; then through the second door into the large painting studio—a high space of darkness just visible by the one light, and perhaps a few dying embers in the grate. Holding his hand in front of the candle, Watts would throw the light on each part of the canvas in the different pictures on which he had been working that day. He was always eager for criticism. “Do you think I have improved it? I work on till I can’t see what I have done”, he would often say. The contrast was striking between the impressive strength and size of the paintings and the sensitive frailness of the small hand held up so as to shade the light from everything but the mighty work it had achieved. What a wonderful power had the spirit and mind of this fragile, ageing figure to create and ring out grand anthems in colour and design! It suggested to me the power of a little bird, small and hidden among the branches of a tree, which can yet fill a whole landscape with the fervour of its thrilling song. On those winter evenings, when entering the vast, dark, silent studio, where the earnest fever of the painter spent itself in arduous labour from sunrise to sunset, day after day, from one year’s end to another, it felt as if rising into another order of life than that we are all living in these modern days, into an atmosphere that inspired aspiration and growth, while at the same time it was resting and calming to the nerves. The self-centred individuality of the great artist reigned in it consistently and alone.

‘When the procession returned to the sitting-room Watts ate his very frugal supper, we talking, or I reading to him. The meal was always the same—the cold remains of the dull little pudding made without sugar which had been hot for his dinner in the middle of the day, and a tumbler of milk mixed with barley-water; summer and winter, never any change. Even out of this very simple fare, Watts, if he was tired, would evolve a tragic self-reproach. To have as much as that distressed him; and when he thought of all the people who were starving he could hardly eat it! I often tried to impress upon him that if he refrained and gave the pudding to a beggar, the beggar would throw it away. It was not amusing enough as food for any beggar I had ever come across. He would be easily laughed out of his tragic moods. After his supper Watts would often settle down to nonsense. He was like a child in his power of enjoying nonsense. Especially when Mr. Barrington was also in high spirits the fun would become rampant. Watts had accumulated many ridiculous stories. One upon another he would hurry them out. Terrible puns were made, every kind of off-shoot of high spirits which he was capable of rising to, and when we left him we felt the happy satisfaction that we had helped him to secure a good night. On the other winter evenings, his vitality reawakened, we





20. CLYTE
ABOUT 1868. BRONZE

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would plunge into serious and interesting literature. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* was a favourite book, particularly the part describing herbals and the cures they effected. Bacon's *Essays*, Ruskin, and, at times, the Old Testament. Any current literature that had reference to subjects especially interesting, such as criticisms on the art then being exhibited, we read. Some strange works Watts would get hold of. I remember two American books that greatly fascinated him, dealing with somewhat scientific, but distinctly fantastic, new ideas. When I mentioned these ideas to Lord Avebury, then Sir John Lubbock, he said they were quite unsound as science. Any book that started the working of Watts' own imagination naturally interested him, for he enjoyed greatly living in his imagination. As a rule, in those days we talked much more than we read. The reading was the text, the sermon was all our own. The playgrounds we found for our minds were inspiringly comprehensive. Whether our knowledge was sound or unsound on all the subjects we scampered over was immaterial, there was enough keen interest, enough keen vitality aroused by our ideas clashing together to strike some original matter out of most subjects.¹

‘On summer evenings he would ask me to play to him on the piano-forte in the studio. He liked simple tunes, especially airs by Beethoven and Handel. The rays of the warm evening light would come in through the high studio window, striking down on the paintings. As golden shafts from the setting sun lighted on the canvases placed on easels towards the light, how gloriously would the autumn-like tints burn out in fervent colour. With a passionate depth they glowed in harmony with the music of the masters. Watts was indeed right in calling them his “Anthems”. That so fragile a presence could contain in it the power to create such things! On most evenings, after I had played a little while, he would put down his palette and brushes and say, “Let us have a song. It is good for the health. It expands the chest.” His favourites were Dibdin's *Tom Bowling*, *The Banks of Allan Water*, *The Vicar of Bray*, *Sally in our Alley*, *Tell me, my Heart* and many others of Bishop's songs. The elaborate cadenzas in these last he achieved with astonishing ease and precision considering his age and the fact that he had not practised for years.”²

Watts did not go out much, but Mrs. Barrington was not his only friend. The land on which Little Holland House had stood was chiefly bought by artists, and the area became a colony of well-to-do painters and sculptors. It was a strange transformation. The old grace and quiet of the ramshackle farm buildings had given place to dark red houses of the most extraordinary shapes and sizes. Some had pinnacles and turrets and towers, some sprawled about the ground in senseless asymmetry, and all

¹ Mrs. Russell Barrington: *G. F. Watts*, pp. 64-71.

² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

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of them displayed opulence and lack of taste. Lady Holland watched, with dismay, from the windows of Holland House the strange erections as they arose. She even thought that the disappearance of the swallows in the summer of 1876 had been due to the 'dreadful houses'. One 'tall red house', the home of Luke Fildes, the anecdotal painter, was a special bugbear, and such was Lady Holland's anxiety that Lord Ilchester offered to erect a mound to blot out the sight of the offending villas, but the scheme was dropped owing to the great expense.¹ Nevertheless, despite the ugliness which Watts does not seem to have noticed, it was pleasant for him to live in an artistic atmosphere, however much the aims of his neighbours might differ from his own. There was Thorneycroft the sculptor nearby, Holman Hunt not far away, Marcus Stone, the historical painter, opposite, and, above all, there was Leighton.

Watts' friendship with Leighton had commenced as early as 1855, when he met the precocious and highly instructed young painter on the occasion of his bringing over his *Cimabue's Madonna* for that year's Academy. They were a great contrast. Considering his early success and the number and academic eminence of his teachers, one would have supposed Leighton to have been nothing but a mass of inhibitions. It is true his art does seem to have suffered, and a frost which rarely thaws was cast over his inspiration, but to Leighton art was not an end in itself. There was life and money and influence besides art, and these he pursued with such captivating nonchalance that he ended life as President of the Academy and obtained a Peerage. He had a worldly fastidiousness about him that charmed the poor introspective painter of *Hope*. When Mrs. Barrington showed him some of her experiments in pigment in which Watts had shared, he cried out: 'Oh Mrs. Barrington, la cuisine!' If there was not nobility in his art, there was an aristocratic nobility in the way he set about it. Watts loved to be prejudiced about an opinion because it gave him a spasm of pleasure at his own daring, but Leighton was 'all sweet reasonableness, yet no weakness.'² He was in fact everything that Watts was not. During his years at Melbury Road Leighton was an influence that lessened the egocentric tension of his mind. Talking with him Watts would escape from his studio into the large aristocratic world in which Leighton moved with such ease and success—a world in which Watts too could shine, but only by a ceaseless effort of the will which drained him of strength.

The houses round Melbury Road with their spacious studios, often set in extensive gardens, were ideal places for musical parties, and such events were a source of great pleasure to Watts. It was an effort to get him to face

¹ Ilchester: *Holland House 1820-1900*, p. 447.

² Barrington: *G. F. Watts*, p. 194.

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the people, but once there he would find some old companion and chatter away, very pleased with himself for having been prevailed upon. The music did much to soothe his overwrought nerves when he was worried or was working too hard.

And so his life went on in its exasperatingly humdrum way. At early dawn the frail hand was at work on the glowing canvases, and at night-fall as the light failed after the sunset he would still be at work, touching, criticising, perfecting. In the evenings there would be the same attempts at relaxation, which more often than not turned into improvements of his mind. Then there were the same giddy moments of inspiration and the blight of disappointment that he had known in his youth. And so his life might have gone on, but fate, which had often been kind to Watts, decided that this should not be the end, but in many respects the beginning.

VIII

FAME

Fame, it is said, is a flirt, and certainly Watts had been snubbed enough by her. On his first appearance at Florence he was already so obviously moulded for greatness that it surprised those who knew him that somehow it had escaped him. He had waited long years for the mantle to descend,¹ and for ever it seemed to put off coming. But in the fullness of time the little painter who had striven with such abnormal diligence was to be rewarded.

As far back as 1865 Watts had been introduced to Charles Rickards, a Manchester business man. Tom Taylor had been instrumental in the matter, and no doubt he saw in the introduction an opportunity to help his friend. But Watts, as usual, had to be pushed, and Taylor was writing to their mutual acquaintance J. E. Taylor: 'I have written urgently to Watts re Rickards, pointing out to him how important it is that the great North should be impregnated with great Art of a different character from much of that which enriches your picture dealers, and fills galleries they have the catering for.'² Unlike Haydon, Watts apparently had not fully recognized the importance of the barbaric North, but when his friendship with Rickards was represented as missionary work among the benighted victims of industrialism he could not but be fired with enthusiasm. Tom Taylor had caused Watts great unhappiness in his well-meant interference over the Ellen Terry affair, but it is fitting that the kindness of the little dramatist did not go altogether unrewarded, for it was ultimately through Rickards that Watts achieved popularity.

Rickards was a devoted and humble servant of the arts, and, having had his portrait painted, he began to make a collection of Watts's. He would buy as much as the painter would let him have until his rooms were filled with allegories and mythological pictures. For once Watts had found a patron who was not only eager to buy more than was for sale, but allowed himself to be patronised. 'I will send the pictures in a day or two', wrote Watts in the early part of their friendship, 'and I must ask you to hang them on a dark wall; an oil picture suffers so very much if hung upon a light ground. If your walls are light I would beg you, for the sake of your own pleasure in the pictures, to have your room re-papered. It may

¹ He was, however, elected R.A. in 1867.

² M. S. Watts, i, p. 223.





22. STUDY FOR THE MAGDALEN
EARLY '60s

seem a rather bold request, but pictures are expensive luxuries, and a man ought to get all the satisfaction he can out of them, and, I may say, in justice to the artist. Any dark colour red or green, and no matter how rich would do, and if possible the picture should be hung with the light on the spectator's left, and not too near the window, because the spectator should stand between the pictures and the light."¹ At the same time Rickards became a convenient audience at which he could deliver his theories, and his half-conscious sense of being ill used by the public. In September 1865, he writes: 'I am glad that the subject of art is become one of interest to you, and I hope, from what you say, to some of your friends. I am sure that you now feel it is an interest that should not be left out of any man's life. However little I might care about being known myself, I am glad that the opinions I have arrived at by really earnest thinking should be known and tested. In the belief that art of noble aim is necessary to a great nation, I am sometimes tempted in my impatience to try if I cannot get subscriptions to carry out a project I have long had, to erect a statue to unknown worth—in the words of the author of *Felix Holt*, "a monument to the faithful who are not famous." I think this would be a worthy thing to do, and if I had not unfortunately neglected opportunities of making money, I would certainly do it at my own expense. . . . I could execute a colossal bronze statue that should be a real monument. I would give up all other work to be enabled to carry out such an idea, and should be contented if guaranteed against loss; contented to be able to meet the expenses of the undertaking. Please think a little about this plan.'² But even Rickards does not seem to have taken the hint, and the matter was dropped. But throughout his life Rickards continued to buy many of the unsaleable pictures.

By the eighties the collection amounted to over sixty pictures, and Rickards' house had become in effect a sort of Watts' gallery. The good old philanthropist loved showing people his treasures and it was an idea near his heart that one day there should be a public exhibition of his Watts's. Indeed the *Academy* had suggested it in 1876, at a time when Watts' reputation was rapidly growing, and he had had some success in an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, where he had been given a room to himself. But Watts never grasped the extent of his success. *Love and Death* had already made a great impression, and in the seventies the *Manchester Guardian* spoke of him as 'one of England's greatest masters.'³ But although Watts had written that an artist's work should be exhibited together he shrank from the ordeal. 'I dread the result of your experiment',

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 224.

² *Ibid.*, i, pp. 223, 224.

³ *Manchester Guardian*, Sept. 18, 1874.

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he wrote, '—of the effect on the public of so many pictures by the same hand challenging criticism under conditions of light, etc., not to be contemplated by the workman. I dread this unfavourable result less on my own account than on yours, for I think it would give you real pain to have your old friends mauled by adverse criticism. As for myself such things have happened to me many a time and oft; but though I am not without my due share of an artist's sensitiveness, the contemplation of the wide distance on which I have always fixed my eyes enables me to estimate the present at its real value, and not to take for rocks the ordinary stepping-stones of daily life. I hope you are well; I am not good for much myself, and have done very little work.'

But the thing was already decided and the letter ends with strict injunctions about the light. 'Pray have the light of the exhibition room lowered as much as possible, the more the better.

'It requires a hundred years to bring a picture that aims at grave effects to its proper tone; until after that lapse of time it should not be exposed to strong light.'¹

The exhibition opened in 1880. It was more successful than he had dared hope, and Rickards wrote to say that he had received letters from all quarters telling him how much educational work the pictures had done. For the first time his pictures had been seen by the general inartistic public, and they had produced the effect he had intended. The 'grave effects' had worked upon the people of Manchester. He had always striven to ennoble the base materialism of the age and now it seemed that his wish was about to be granted. He had already taken the first step towards becoming a great Victorian. His early career had been marred by adverse critics, but by the sixties, although he was still attacked, he was revered; the seventies found him established as a great portrait painter; by the eighties he had become 'the painter of eternal truths' and it became almost an act of impiety to criticise his work. It had never occurred to Watts that he could be successful outside small and highly civilized cliques. He imagined the lower middle classes to be as rough and boisterous as he had known them in his youth, but the middle class of 1880 was very different from that of 1828. It might still be Philistine deep down in its bones, but it was fashionable to revere art and to be sentimental. Other painters might be more vulgarly popular, but Watts' combination of dignity and simple ethics seemed designed to provide the serious members of the middle class—and a great many were serious—with just what they wanted. They could understand his subjects because the morality was as universal and as simple as the Christian ethic, and at the same time they could revere

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 5.

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the grandeur of the rendering even though they could not understand it. Above all they could revere the painter himself. The Victorian was by nature a worshipper of heroes. Hero worship compensated for the fundamental insecurity of the age. And Watts was uniquely fitted for the rôle Providence destined him to play. The Victorian journalist delighted to dilate upon his unselfishness, his devotion to art and morality, his early rising and sense of greatness. It was all a little too good to be true, but if any man came near the standard his contemporaries expected, that man was Watts.

Encouraged by his success at Manchester Watts attempted something far bolder. He had had a number of pictures he could not sell hanging about his studio and in a store shed. He felt the necessity of building some proper house for them, and when his friends suggested a special gallery attached to his home which should be open to the public at certain hours he became enthusiastic over the scheme. In 1881 the building was opened, and he was gratified to find that a considerable number of people came to see the pictures. The letters he received from strangers thanking him for the pleasure gave him a sense of being no longer isolated, but up and at his self-chosen task of educating the public in nobility and goodness. It became quite fashionable for young ladies with nothing better to do on a Sunday afternoon to stroll through Kensington Gardens and pay a visit to Watts' studio.

In the same year Sir Coutts Lindsay, the proprietor of the Grosvenor Gallery, proposed that he should have a one-man exhibition. He had seen the Rickards collection and been impressed with the popularity of the Manchester undertaking. Watts, however, was unconvinced. At Manchester he had been successful, but might he not fail in London? The thought that his pictures might become the centre of some disagreeable controversy haunted him. In the end, however, he was prevailed upon, and he would sit over the fire with Mrs. Barrington concocting lists of suitable pictures. There were the owners to be written to, and many things to be got ready. In the end he became quite excited about it, although he never allowed himself the indulgence of anything but the gloomiest pessimism as to the result. He went away to Brighton for the first few weeks of the exhibition and he read there the criticism that appeared in *The Times*.

'The exhibition of oil paintings, which was opened to the public on Saturday last, (January 1st), is in several respects one of unique interest. It is exclusively confined to the work of one master; that master is the oldest and, broadly speaking, the greatest of our Royal Academicians, and the exhibition has been made in his lifetime and rendered as complete as

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possible by his assistance. For once, owing to private enterprise, the life-work of a great artist has been brought together before the light has faded from his eyes and the speech from his lips, and writers and picture-lovers have an opportunity of paying that homage to the living which is but too generally reserved for the dead. An English artist, who has painted our worthiest "in arms, in art, in song", in statesmanship, science and literature; who has given form to the dreams of our poets, the events of our history, and the traditions of our faith, pours the chief results of forty years' labour into one great gallery, and says to us practically, "I have asked nothing from you but the leave to work. I have worked, and this is the result. Throughout my life I have neither sought your praise nor feared your censure." The critic continued by expressing the wish that the exhibition 'could remain open for a year instead of two months' and 'continued articles could be written and lectures given on its contents', so that visitors might come 'to think seriously about art and its right aims and methods.' He found he was 'a little at a loss to account for Mr. Watts's general lack of popularity' when the scope of his work was considered.

The second notice was as eulogistic as the first. Even *The Song of the Shirt* and *Under a dry Arch* were praised. Other notices described the portraits and the allegories. Of the latter the early ones, such as *Fata Morgana* and *Mischief* were not liked. *Love and Death* on the contrary was given considerable attention. Referring to the *Angel of Death* the critic wrote: 'If we were to leave out of account every single merit save that of dignity of form, we should have to rank this work high among the masterpieces of modern art; but when we add to that the power of composition that is shown, the originality of conception, and the grandeur of scale upon which it is carried out, we know not where we can find another work of similar merit without going back to the best days of Italian Art. This is not an opinion expressed hastily, or a mere phrase, but a deliberate judgment formed after careful consideration.' He then went on to attack those critics who had objected to Watts's artistic elevation and, by implication, those who found him greater as a painter of portraits than as a painter of allegories. 'To talk as if Mr. Watts had done something wrong because he has spoken to us in louder language than ordinary when he has something very important to say seems to us a curiously ignorant criticism.'¹

Watts had been rather upset at the sweeping generalisations of some of the critics, particularly in respect of technique. But the article in *The Times* was a pleasant surprise and ensured the success of the exhibition. However, he wrote a long letter to Mrs. Barrington in which he said he felt gratified

¹ *The Times* 1882, Jan. 6, 25, 26. May 8, 25.

at the critic's perception of aims, but at the same time thought that the whole article was written in too friendly a spirit. On second reading he felt almost alarmed. He would be sorry if excessive approval of his aims should read like reflection upon other artists. He had got along with being underrated, it was better than being overpraised; and so on in this strain. Nevertheless, he sat down and wrote his thanks to the critic. But he was not content. He became disturbed. He thought he had unduly influenced the critic in his favour by seeing him before the exhibition opened. He became quite convinced that he had been culpable in the matter.

Other critics took up the exhibition in much the same way and Mrs. Barrington could soon write that it was a great success. Watts was now established as a creator of allegories and not merely as a painter of portraits.

The critic of the *London Quarterly Review* was generally very sympathetic. He particularly admired the simpler allegories and mythological pictures, picking out *Psyche*, *Love and Death* and *Orpheus and Eurydice* as Watts' highest achievements in this form of art. It was significant of the change that was taking place in Watts' reputation that the portraits though highly praised are relegated to the end of the article. For good or ill Watts was to stand before the public as a painter of allegories. Nevertheless, praise in 1882 was not yet injudiciously enthusiastic. There were many failures, the critic contended, as well as many successes. These he believed to be due to an over-literary attitude towards his art.

'Let us take, for instance, such a picture as that entitled *To all Churches: a symbolical design*. What does it mean? To what facts, truths, dogmas, opinions does it bear witness? A large sexless figure sits on a cloud canopy in mid air. At its feet, in the fold of its dress, are huddled some four or five rosy babes. Behind the sky is gold. Below a wide champaign, with a city and gleaming mere, and blue belts of distance, stretches to the horizon. There is the symbol, not, indeed, presented with any great completeness—for the picture is unfinished, as if the artist himself had grown dissatisfied with his work—yet still presented definitely enough, so far as its outward sign, its body, so to speak, is concerned. But what does it symbolise? What message does this figure wish to convey, with its one hand outstretched and the other laid on its heart? Some message, doubtless, of kindness and tolerance; but what?'¹

'Is another instance necessary? Let us turn to an earlier work, *Life's Illusions*. Here there is no room for doubt as to the painter's meaning. He himself furnishes an explanation which occupies nearly a page of the catalogue. The "design" is "allegorical", "typifying the march of human life." To the left is a swirl of upfloating figures, of flesh and drapery and

¹ *London Quarterly Review* (Vol. 58), 1882, pp. 155, 156.

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garlanded flowers. These are "fair visions of beauty, the abstract embodiments of divers forms of hope and ambition" that "hover high in the air above the gulf which stands as the goal of all men's lives." To the right, "upon the narrow space of earth that overhangs the deep abyss" and quite heedless of the "abstract embodiments"—though these are large, substantial and very obvious—are a "knight in armour" who "pricks on his horse in quick pursuit" of a bubble, "an aged student" who is so absorbed in his book that the next step will take him over the edge of the precipice, a pair of lovers, a child pursuing a butterfly. The ground is all bestrewn with bones, and scattered gold, and sceptres and crowns.

'And here, again, one feels that the inspiration from which the work has sprung is literary rather than artistic. The picture has no coherence. Its parts do not hang together. Its composition is confused. The little plateau on which all these incidents are crowded is obviously too small. Images which in poetry or impassioned prose are admissible, and even striking, become almost mirth-inspiring when presented to the eye in form and colour. None but a very foolish old gentleman persists in reading a book at the edge of a very steep cliff. When we *read* of the soldier

*Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth,*

our imagination never presents to us an actual bubble. Shakespeare did not mean that it should. The "bubble" here is merely a very vivid kind of adjective qualifying reputation and imparting to it, in a particularly striking manner, certain attributes of lightness, prismatic beauty, evanescence. But show us a knight, of mature years, armed for fiercest strife, and riding madly in a very confined space, after a soap-bubble, and the image loses its magic altogether. Art is trying to do the work of literature, and doing it badly.¹

But the main tenor of the article was of high and judicious praise. 'We are standing here in the presence of a thinker saddened by the insoluble problems of this weary world, yet not cast down; of a poet whose imagination is equal to high flight; of an artist capable of giving form and colour to the creations of his thought and fancy; of a man possessing the large tolerance of culture: we are in the presence, too, of one full of high disinterested purpose and aspirations, and not easily satisfied.'²

And the end cannot but have pleased the lonely painter when he read it over with Mrs. Barrington in the evening. 'And he has his reward—the reward not merely of congratulation, applause, and genuine admiration which this exhibition has called forth—not merely even of feeling how

¹ *London Quarterly Review* (Vol. 58), 1882, pp. 156–157.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 174–175.

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many there are who, in his words, have had their minds so "drawn up and tuned", when looking at these pictures, as to "respond to" his imaginative thought "and carry on the strain"—but a reward even higher still: the reward of knowing, for he scarce can help but know it, that from the lower cloudland of his seekings, strivings, sorrowings, there rise some peaks of art achievement from which the light will not fade.¹

The *Art Journal* also admired the exhibition, though the article was faintly tinged with criticism. 'If he has been, and continues to be, less popularly appreciated as a designer than as a recorder of the faces which have made his time memorable, the reason may lie partly in the almost oppressive seriousness of his subjects of composition, and partly in the small heed which he generally takes of the quality of beauty, whether in the human type, in surface, or in colour. A high beauty of line and action his allegories almost always possess; but it is a kind of beauty which only a few perhaps out of a mixed public would find sensibly delightful.'

The article, however, ended, as did most, with words of praise and encouragement. 'Rich, serious and worthy is the life-work represented on these walls, and the public has seldom had so excellent an opportunity of studying the achievement of an artist still in its midst.'²

The critic of the *Saturday Review* was short but full of praise. The first part of the article was taken up with conventional praise of the portraits. Plunging, as it were, into deeper water, the writer was not so sure of himself with regard to the inventive pieces. In contrast to the critic of the *London Quarterly Review* he picked out *Life's Illusions* as specially praiseworthy. He called it 'a work of remarkable beauty and power . . . it still holds its own even with the best of the painter's later achievements.' *Paulo and Francesca* and *Daphne* were again highly thought of, while *Love and Death* was considered the masterpiece of the Exhibition. 'The collected exhibition of Mr. Watts' work forms a worthy tribute to a long and distinguished career. Perhaps no other living representative of the English school so well deserves this exceptional honour: none, certainly, could so triumphantly endure the severe test which such an experiment implies. . . . In its [his life's work] steadfastness of purpose it affords a splendid example to his younger contemporaries, and in the excellence of actual achievement it will serve to confirm in general esteem the respect with which his talents have always been held by the more serious members of his own profession.'³

Already the transition of Watts the painter into Watts the great Vic-

¹ *London Quarterly Review* (Vol. 58), 1882, p. 176.

² *Art Journal*, 1882, New Series, ii, pp. 61-62.

³ *Saturday Review* (Vol. 53), 1882, Jan. 7, p. 17.

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torian and thence, by swift gradation, into Watts the old bore, was under way. The phrases 'steadfastness of purpose', 'splendid example', 'respect', 'serious members of his own profession' were like prophetic chords to what the next years of his life were to be—the unbroken monotony of success.

There were few dissonant voices, but Francis Wedmore writing in the *Academy* was distinctly more critical. He complained sourly that 'a whole volume of appreciative comment on Mr. Watts' portraiture and Mr. Watts' allegorical design having been issued to the world during the last fortnight all over the London press,' it was not for him to join the chorus of praise. He found Watts was cut off from 'humanity, the human nature of every-day.' His portraits dealt with selected types, with men of political action or literary attainment, with women of society, *dilettanti*, graceful girls who were born ladies, well-groomed children. Such portraits displayed the painter's good taste but no 'care or understanding for the rougher or simpler, or wilder and more various, herd, altogether beyond and apart from this carefully watched fold.' Rather unkindly Watts is rated for making too much of the horses and too little of the man in *Horses and Drayman: Midday-rest*, while with regard to the *Sempstress* and *Under a dry Arch*, which he had painted on his return from Italy, the critic summed up in this way: 'With modern life, Mr. Watts is elegiac.' He complained of his colouring and asserted that it was not remarked upon because the pictures were seen together and their smaller faults, in such an atmosphere, were not visible. Watts' draughtsmanship is praised, but this was but a crumb of comfort to be followed by the sharp reminder that true 'poetry ought not to require a page of printed explanation in the catalogue.'¹

But by far the most gratifying results of the Exhibition were the private letters he received. Lord Lytton was particularly eulogistic. 'My sensations', he wrote, 'in contemplating them [the pictures] all together were to me those of a traveller who suddenly finds himself, on awaking, in the midst of some far land—the birth place of rare fruits and flowers, or precious ores and gems, of which till then he had seen only isolated specimens, scattered here and there about the world, and some of them in incongruous company.'² Watts made a fine reply which is in effect a confession of faith. 'I am touched to sadness by your letter; how can all this be merited by any efforts of mine? I haunt the footsteps of the great dead, those who, while they ennoble their birth-land, enrich the world and ennoble humanity itself. From my childhood I have had a longing to be of that band, but I dare not think it is for me; and praise such as yours, and from such as you, seems somehow more distinctly to show me what is not,

¹ *Academy* (Vol. 21), 1882, Jan. 14.

² M. S. Watts, ii, p. 12.

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by showing me what your own genius presents to you as mine. It is you who complete the strain if I strike the chord. The dread of being a deceiver, even without intention, is more distressing to me than the want of general sympathy (through which I have hitherto worked) has ever proved . . . I want to have your sympathy. I shall want the sympathy of those whom I most admire and respect, for life now is all down hill with me, and I have my best to do.¹

But perhaps the most gratifying appreciation was that of F. W. H. Myers in the *Fortnightly*:

*For many a year the master wrought,
And wisdom deepened slow with years;
Guest-chambers of his inmost thought
Were filled with shapes too stern for tears;
Yet Joy was there, and murmuring Love,
And Youth that bears with hastened breath,
But, throned in peace all these above,
The unrevealing eyes of Death.*

*Faces there were which won him yet,
Fair daughters of an iron age;
In iron truth portrayed he sat
Warrior and statesman, bard and sage.
From hidden deeps their past he drew
The ancestral bent of stock and stem;
More of their hearts than yet they knew.
Thro' their own gaze looked out on them.*

*Yet oftenest in the past he walked
With god or hero long gone by,
Oft, like his pictured Genius, talked
With rainbow forms that span the sky:
Thereto his soul hath listed long,
When silent voices spake in air,
Hath mirrored many an old-world song
Remote and mystic, sad and fair.*

And it ended:

*Then as he walked, like one who dreamed,
Thro' silent highways silver-boar,
More wonderful that city seemed,
And he diviner than before:*

¹ M. S. Watts, p. 13.

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*A voice was calling, All is Well;
Clear in the vault Selene shone,
And over Plato's homestead fell
A shadow of the Parthenon.¹*

There was but one thing to disturb the pleasures of success. Sir Coutts Lindsay and many of Watts' friends put their heads together in thinking out a way to honour and give pleasure to their friend. They privately made enquiries as to whether a dinner in the Grosvenor Gallery in honour of the painter would be likely to succeed. More than a hundred people promised to be present including Gladstone, Harcourt, Leighton, Millais, and Poynter. Unfortunately, a guest who imagined the whole matter was fixed up wrote to Watts declining the invitation. Watts, who was at Brighton far from well through nervous strain, was terribly fussed. Not only dared he not face so many people, especially when gathered together for the purpose of honouring him, but he felt that there was something gross and indecent in banqueting beneath his productions. He immediately wrote that the dinner could never be, that he could not contemplate a thought of it. Lord Lytton fully sympathised: 'Eating and drinking appear to me grotesquely inappropriate modes (not improved, but the reverse, by the commonly accompanying post prandial oratory) of expressing admiration for a man's genius or gratitude for his work.'² Burne-Jones, who was a prime conspirator, was forced to write long letters of apology in his usual captivating style. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that even he was not wholly pleased by Watts' capriciousness. 'Many of us wanted to feast you in a cosy and unostentatious way, and the number of people who wanted to join in the manifestation grew and grew. It would have been a great success . . . I had no more than others the claim of that distinction [of originating the idea], but of course, whatever part I took, I am sorry enough now, sorry to have vexed instead of pleasing you, such being the innocent purpose.'³

The exhibition was not a great financial success, for the majority of the pictures remained unsold and returned to the gallery at Melbury Road, but it revolutionised Watts' public position. *The Times'* critic had seen to it that he should no longer be hidden from popular notice. It was not long before prints of *Hope*, the first version of which was completed some years later, were beginning to hang in the rooms of art lovers and those to whom Watts' disillusioned yet ultimately optimistic ethic appealed. But as late as 1883 he was writing: 'You will not find me represented in any print-seller's windows.'⁴ It took some time for the Grosvenor Gallery success to produce its effects, and before this could happen a further series of exhibitions finally ensured his fame.

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, pp. 20, 21.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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At the International Exhibition in Paris nine of Watts' pictures had been exhibited, and a wealthy American, Miss Gertrude Mead, who was later to marry Edwin Abbey the artist, saw them. When she came to London she went to the gallery at Melbury Road and accidentally fell in with Watts. Quite a friendship developed, Watts beginning his letters to her 'Dear fellow-traveller', and ending 'yours affectionately.' Miss Mead was an able woman, and an enthusiast for elevating art. She could not but feel after her European journeys that America would benefit by seeing Watts' pictures. Once determined upon, nothing could prevent her carrying out her design. Watts was seriously alarmed. The thought of his precious pictures crossing the many hundreds of miles of the Atlantic filled him with terror. He tried to put her off by painting photographs with oil colour, which he seems to have imagined the Americans would be glad to accept instead of the originals. But Miss Mead was formidable and persistent. Moreover, she seems to have enlisted Mrs. Barrington's aid. And what could he do against such a combination? Reluctantly he consented to let the pictures go. Mrs. Barrington wrote a long preface to the catalogue with copious notes about the pictures, Watts' technique, and his spiritual ideals. Already one cannot help noticing that the effect of success was not altogether fortunate. He had always had a tendency to over-emphasise the literary content of his pictures, and with success this tendency became more and more prominent. Was it too much to expect that the thought of preaching to the American continent should not go to his head? Eventually all was arranged. In order to avoid paying the heavy duty on works of art the Metropolitan Museum, New York, where the exhibition took place, was put into bond, and this remained in force until the pictures returned to England.

Watts, of course, was full of forebodings. He had an intuition that the exhibition would not prove successful. 'This exhibition is to me, I must confess, a terrible nightmare. I cannot say that it is other than a tribulation. . . . I shall wish them [the pictures] safe back because I wish to present the best (carried as far as I can) to my own country; but if they go down, or are otherwise destroyed, my regret will not be the death of me.'¹ By the time the S.S. *Canada* sailed in September 1884 he had reconciled himself to the thought that his life work should be lost at the bottom of the Atlantic. More than a fortnight passed before any news of the *Canada* was heard. But in the meantime an unpleasant misunderstanding occurred which gave Watts great pain. He had always dreaded public scenes, and now such a one as he had often imagined occurred. He was accused by an American critic of puffing his own productions before the American

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 27.

public had had time to form its own judgment. Certainly Watts was not without a knack for publicity, much as he might despise it, and much as his conduct seemed to preclude anything so vulgar. He made use of the Press when he thought the Press could help him. But on this occasion he was accused of having got a journalist to write up the exhibition, whereas there does seem to be evidence that the journalist in question took the first step in the matter. However, it was very disturbing to Watts. He had been much upset by the thought that he had unduly influenced the critic of *The Times*. That was a private matter, though critics on other papers darkly hinted that the whole Press was strangely unanimous in its appreciation. But now the matter was brought before the public. He tried to pretend to Miss Mead that the affair did not concern him, but the length of his letters on the subject show that this was far from the case. He could not understand how he could appear to be showing forth his own merits. 'Merits!' he wrote, 'with the ideals I have and the knowledge I have of what has been done by the great ones, how can I claim merit! I am supposed arrogantly to point out how my pictures are to be understood and admired. . . . It touches me no more than an imputation of habitual drunkenness would. And what can it matter? As far as I am concerned, nothing . . .'¹

Meanwhile nothing was heard of the *Canada*. Watts immediately decided that his worst fears had proved only too true. Had he not had premonitions about it? When the ship eventually reached New York he was sure the pictures must have been badly damaged by the stormy passage. And then when this was found not to be the case he considered it strange that he heard so little from America about the exhibition. 'I hear nothing from America, and really can't help thinking if the success of the things had been real or satisfactory—[someone?] would have written. I do not think much about the matter and am certainly not troubled by it, but for the sake of so many people I should be sorry for failure.'² The exhibition, however, was according to one of his correspondents an 'unparalleled success', and a request that the pictures should remain till October instead of returning in March as had been originally intended was made by the officials of the Museum. Watts readily agreed, and on their way back to London they were exhibited at Birmingham and Nottingham. And while they were at Nottingham fifteen were lent to Rugby School. Watts was by now considered an exemplary teacher of youth.

In 1880 Watts had been approached by the Vice Chancellor of Oxford, Dean Liddell. 'Will you come', he wrote, 'and be made D.C.L. at our Commemoration, arraying yourself in the scarlet and crimson robe in which Reynolds delighted to paint himself?'³ But Watts had not been

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 28.

² Mrs. Barrington, p. 117.

³ M. S. Watts, pp. 18, 19.

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able to overcome his feeling of insufficiency. He had had no formal education to speak of, and the thought of being publicly honoured by the University, though gratifying, disturbed him very much. He resolutely refused. Later he declined a similar honour at Cambridge. But in 1882 after the success at the Grosvenor Gallery the offers were repeated by both universities, and he accepted. He travelled down to Oxford with the Barringtons, overcome with nervous apprehensions that he would make a public fool of himself. He quite genuinely felt that the University would come to regret its decision of honouring him. When the time came for the lunch he was in such a nervous condition that he escaped to the Meadows and ate sandwiches there. The actual ceremony passed off much more easily than he had expected. No one got up and denounced him as an impostor! But there was a great deal of noise made by the undergraduates, and Canon Scott Holland, who felt that it might upset the highly strung painter, attempted to apologise, adding that really the uproar was quite barbarous. Watts answered him resolutely enough as if he rather enjoyed it. 'Oh we must be barbarian, sometimes,' he said.¹

In 1885 Gladstone offered him a baronetcy. At first Watts was in an agony of indecision. He allowed his friends to congratulate him for three days and then suddenly told them that he had declined the honour. Lord Carlisle had called on him some months before, but Watts, who was already a little deaf, had misunderstood the matter, and thought he would be offered the C.B. He did not disapprove of titles, but he did not think a title would be in keeping with his work or his aspirations. He had always felt himself an outsider. In his pessimistic way, when he had dreamt of fame it had been after his death. He expected to lack appreciation during his lifetime. By a strange irony the order of events was now to be reversed. Leighton, the Barringtons and many of his friends were at first very vexed with him, which caused him a good deal of unhappiness, but in the end they came to understand and respect his decision. The public, at any rate, appreciated his declining the offer, and Thornycroft, the sculptor, said: 'So you won't let them make you Sir George. Well, never mind, you will be Saint George anyway.' And that summed up popular opinion. The offer was repeated by Gladstone in 1894, and was again declined. On the creation of the Order of Merit, Watts was selected to be one of the members, and since it conferred no title, gladly accepted.

Fame had come swiftly, unexpectedly. Halfway through the eighties he was a great man. Life seemed to be drawing in with a sunset glow. But the end had not yet come. Fate had more in store. At the age of seventy, and almost against his will, he was to fall in love.

¹ M. S. Watts, p. 20.

IX

MARY FRASER TYTLER

Mary Fraser Tytler¹ first met Watts when she and her sister visited his studio at Little Holland House. They were the daughters of Charles Edward Fraser Tytler, Scotch landowner and former member of the Indian Civil Service.² Brought up simply in the Highlands, they approached an interview with Watts in a spirit of unfeigned reverence. Was it not something when they were both scarcely twenty to have a private meeting with the Signor? They waited breathless with anticipation in a room with a blue ceiling wondering what they would say to the great man. The elder sister had met Watts before, and had found him charmingly quiet after Mrs. Prinsep's frightening gush, but for Mary it was a first meeting.

At length the summons came. Like the Terry girls, the two Miss Fraser Tytlers paused at the red baize door of the studio to which a card had been pinned: 'I must beg not to be disturbed till after two o'clock.' Mary read the notice with awe. She vaguely wondered what Mr. Watts was like. The visit went well. She was charmed with the atmosphere of the studio. It was so full of glorious and noble aspirations which completely satisfied the direct simplicity as well as the romanticism of her nature. It seemed to her that the studio was a fairy castle and that Watts was a wonderful knight. 'I would not have been surprised', she wrote later, 'if on another visit I had found him all clad in shining armour.'³

The two Miss Fraser Tytlers had artistic ambitions. The elder as a poet, Mary as a painter. Mary had shown considerable talent in drawing and watercolour and wanted to make it her career. She had never been very happy with her stepmother and a continental visit had made her more ambitious to be independent. She was now eager that her father should allow her to study art in London.

She assured him that she would pay her own way, for the Fraser Tytlers were by no means rich. The meeting with Watts was, therefore, a step in her career. It was also more than that, for Watts was to her the only painter. He was, she wrote, 'the painter of painters for me.'

Watts' adoring young visitor was twenty-one, and her face was as simple

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and delicate as her nature, with just a hint about the chin of the stern Scotch endurance which lay at the root of it. Certainly Watts, who was a keen observer, cannot have failed to be impressed with the charming, almost bashful simplicity of her manners. Her back was slightly rounded from stooping over her drawing board, and her hair was too practically done beneath her hat to be pretty. Moreover, she had an aristocratic aloofness about her which made her appear cold. On these considerations the connoisseurs of beauty did not assign her a high place in their estimation. But perhaps the real reason for their passing her by was her evident diffidence about her appearance. Her manner showed clearly that however much she might admire beauty in others her own she did not regard. Watts watched her as she moved from picture to picture in controlled though enthusiastic pleasure, and may have wondered at her eager directness so different from his own complicated indecision.

It was five years before they met again. This time it was at Freshwater. Mary was amazed at Watts' early rising. 'What is there to live for but work?' he had asked, and she had felt sad, he was so tired, so spiritual, so indefatigable. 'One afternoon', she wrote, 'in the drawing-room, as some visitors who had driven over to call [at The Briary] rose to say goodbye, they turned to him and asked if they might see the studio. Something in the manner of asking seemed to imply politeness rather than interest but, courteously assenting, he opened the door for them to pass out, drew back behind it to hide a distinct shudder, caught my look of sympathy, and answered it half smiling, while I was uplifted with pride at being trusted with the secret of his feeling.'¹ It was the first intimacy.

In 1876 Watts was writing to thank her for a present.

Little Holland House.²

May 24 1876.

DEAR MISS TYTLER,

I did not half express my thanks for your very beautiful present, indeed I did not know how admirable it was till I came to examine it. I hope you will let me do anything I can that may be of use to you and that you will come and see me as often as you may feel any interest in what I may be about . . .³

Yours sincerely,

G. F. WATTS

To Watts the friendship thus budding was not at first very out of the way. He had always had a number of admiring young ladies about him.

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 299.

² After 1875 this means *new* Little Holland House, 6 Melbury Road.

³ This and following letters in possession of Mrs. L. Chapman.

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Nevertheless, there was something about Mary Fraser Tytler that attracted him. Perhaps it was her fresh lively complexion, or the vigorous simplicity of her character. Whatever it was the friendship continued to grow. In 1879 he was addressing her: 'My dear Miss Tytler or rather My dear Miss Mary'.

In 1882, after the Watts exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery, Mary wrote and told him how much she had enjoyed it.

Sanguhar House,
Forres, N.B.
March 14th.

MY DEAR MR. WATTS,

I was so very sorry that twice when I have been in London lately for a few days this winter, I found that you were at Brighton, and I hope you won't mind my troubling you by writing to say so, because if I had seen you I should have tried to tell you a little of what my pleasure has been in seeing your triumph of the Grosvenor Gallery—

Besides having the happiest hours myself there, learning to know your work, and love it even better than ever, I have also had the pleasure of taking others there, and seeing it become known and valued by them in a degree that could only be from such an exhibition as this.

I have long perceived that whilst before some great master's pictures I feel wonder, before yours I always feel *better*, and lately they seemed to me more full than ever of those things which ought to do one most good—

It is rather conceited my venturing to say even this to you, when you must have had all the greatest of England thanking you worthily for your great and good work but I have also a feeling that you are too great not to be pleased to give pleasure to the least, and so I have told you of mine.

Always yours gratefully,

MARY FRASER TYTLER

Little Holland House,
Kensington.
March 17th, 1882.

MY DEAR MISS TYTLER,

I think I am old friend enough and certainly am old enough in years to say My dear Miss Mary, or indeed, My dear Mary without the Miss! Your charming letter has given me great pleasure. To accept all that you say as deserved is out of the question but I can accept it as felt by you. You say that which is most flattering and delightful to me, viz. that my pictures awaken higher thoughts and feelings than is always the case even with some of the best. This is indeed what I would hope, not that I intend to be



23. J. JOACHIM

1865-6



24. JACOB AND ESAU
1868 (DESIGNED 1862-3)

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didactic but simply to affect the mind seriously by nobility of line and colour even as music that one does not put definite words to is capable of moving the hearer, this has hardly been the aim, I mean the self-acknowledged aim of any painter as far as I know, and so may be considered as a line of my own. Though I dare not flatter myself that my success is very complete, still I have many pleasant proofs that I have not altogether failed, I regret not having been able to do more and feel sadly disheartened and find that even the comparatively trifling efforts I have been able to make have sadly knocked me up.

I am very sorry that I was not in town when you called, but hope you will be coming to town later and that you will bring me something to see.

Yours affy

G. F. WATTS

In the winter of 1883-4 Mary was frequently at Little Holland House. In the intimacy of the studio her admiration turned to love, a love that was as all-engrossing as it was completely humble.

‘It was the *perfect* truth’, she wrote long after in a diary, ‘when one day I said: “Signor I think I have been looking for you all my life.” I have longed often for what seemed unattainable, a human sympathy to lean upon, both sure and steadfast, absolutely true because without fear of misunderstanding. . . . And the love? That I have, great and strong, out of the depths of my heart.’¹

68, Eccleston Square, S.W.²

Jan. 26, 1885.

MY VERY DEAR SIGNOR,

I have not been able to go to Little Holland House [because of her brother’s bronchitis] and hear any news of you lately and have been feeling rather an outcast from it, I suppose the result of allowing myself in these fogs to think a good deal of last winter’s sunny days.

I am therefore going to ask for a little comfort, which is, when you have the inclination you will send me *one line* to say how you are. I should so much like to have some good news. A rather sad rumour reached me the other day. I do not think it can be true, that you are not coming back to London this winter . . .

I was out for a few minutes the other day, and the contrast between this winter and last was borne in upon me [by] my noticing how many hideous and vulgar faces passed me—Why was it that last winter on my

¹ Diary in possession of Mrs. L. Chapman by whose permission extracts are reproduced here.

² Her father’s house. ‘This scribble had of course to be re-written, but shows what I would say.’ Note at top of letter.

MARY FRASER TYTLER

way home from Little Holland House, I seemed to meet instead so many faces that had some beauty or nobility in them?

I have had a long time to think since my happy Sunday morning in Nov^r; whether being at Church or with you was best, it has not taken me all the time to settle it.

I don't go back from what I felt and told you last year that I grow when I am with you. I have grown a great bit since I knew you, and have proofs. You said that it was fancy. But if it was a good fancy it was all right. It is *good*, a fact, really.

Please forgive me Signor for this great indulgence to myself.

Always yours MARY

Watts was touched, but also a little frightened. He began by suggesting that she should accompany her brother to a sunny climate. Later, however, he softened and scolded her for the plan she had formed to become an old maid.

24 Lewes Crescent,
Kemp Town, Brighton.
Jan. 27, 1885.

MY DEAR MARY,

. . . I have no plans for not returning to town, on the contrary I must get back to my work as soon as I can, but I do not lose all the tendency of the mischiefs to return. You are a silly Child, and confound a certain atmosphere in my studio arising from the intention of my work acting upon your artistic temperament with me the artist. I could not leave this so, for as it is an unreal thing it cannot be good. If you must have ideals find them where no disappointment is possible, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, and even with these there is a certain danger for you may come to expect too much. I should be sorry to think you have made your plans of too rigid a character, you told me that you intended to be the old Maid Aunt, but I hope better things and expect you will come some day with the news that you are going to be married, but these things come of themselves and all that is necessary is to qualify oneself for future possibilities by making the best possible use of the present not only in work but in the formation also of our ideas, intentions, and even of our day dreams for it is a pity ever to out-grow the pleasure of this indulgence, but I feel myself to be but a stammerer in all that I can say or do, and my dim perceptions are so far above; and my aspirations so far beyond *my possibilities*, that I could almost give up attempts of any kind but of course that won't do. I should like to know what you have been doing, write me a line about it for I am not likely to be home for the next fortnight.

Yours aff

SIGNOR

MARY FRASER TYTLER

This rebuff and a sharp note when she asked to visit him in April convinced Mary that her love was only a dream. She therefore ceased to write, and for a time Watts lost touch with her. But not for long. He did not find it so easy to do without her as he had supposed. In December he wrote for news.

L.H.H.

March 13, '86.

DEAR MARY,

I shall expect you on Monday as soon after 11 as you like. Until you marry or engage yourself I want you to feel that you may speak to me on any subject you like and give me any confidence you please sure that I shall neither misunderstand nor betray it, and that I will always see you whether I expect you or not when I am not engaged.

Meantime Mary was getting involved in her own affairs. Having passed through the Slade and the South Kensington School of Art, she was learning to model under Dalou, and had become a prominent member of a new society which was to grow into the Home and Arts and Industries. She was renting a studio at Epsom. Watts took great interest in helping her. In April he wrote: 'I hope you feel that I have increased respect for you as one to whose nature affectation and falsehood are entirely foreign.'

And then the bombshell fell. Mary wrote that she would like to show him a portrait and bring the man who had sat for it. At first Watts suspected nothing. When she wrote that she might become engaged to her sitter he was much more upset than he thought possible. He asked Mary to come and talk it over, but to his dismay she proposed coming with the man. He was reduced to pleading for half an hour alone with her.

What happened at the interview we do not know. At all events Watts took comfort from the fact that the engagement was not yet decided upon. He wrote that she was to come to him whenever she liked. But this was only shelving the matter. The suspense was too much for him.

July 12, 1886.

MY DEAR MARY,

... I want you to tell me very distinctly when you are engaged, or consider *That* to be within distance, a decided *probability*.

I do not think it should depend upon the question of money! That is not nice.

When you have made up your mind as to that future, or even *That it may be*, I consider all things taken in account; that we should become strangers but you know I shall always be yours

affly

SIGNOR

MARY FRASER TYTLER

I am beginning to feel beyond measure tired, and wish my work were finished, this lumbago takes everything out of me. There are occasions on which I feel it painful to be powerless, neither wealth nor influence!

But he was soon giving her exactly the opposite advice: he could not reconcile himself to her becoming engaged.

July 15th, 1886.

MY DEAR MARY,

I cannot help thinking constantly about your affairs and prospects and being anxious—do not engage yourself unless there is *certainly* of *security* from restricted means, to shrink from such or even from poverty where there is youth and ardent love might perhaps be too *reasonable* to be admirable, but life is not likely to become more easy and even if you did not care much for such difficulties for yourself, it would make you very sad to watch the deepening lines of anxiety on another face, to be pinched by small necessities especially with a family! dependent in any degree for aid from family connections would be a life of such narrowed usefulness that I am sure you would be unhappy, I should be very, very unhappy to think this might be.

I want you to realise that if our intercourse (not our recollection—affectionate friendship) comes to an end and I must not keep alive vain regrets I should condemn but be unable to repress!—I want you to know that I have come to feel for you the most profound and tender respect, and the most absolute trust in the qualities of your nature, I do grieve to lose the much that might have been thought, and done, and seen together but all this is selfish, and knowing this I do not allow any personal feeling to influence me in the advice I give to you to be prudent and very resolute in your prudence. It is not likely I can be of service to you for I live in a narrow circle of influence though not I hope of thought, but if I can be useful at any time I cannot say how great my gratification would be.

SIGNOR

He had already tried to put his own position in the most unfavourable light, so that were she not to become engaged she might see what to expect from him. He felt he would not live long and his wife would only be a nurse and editor of his papers. Moreover, despite his great affection, there was no 'passionate fancy' on his side. But he could not help adding that his £1,000 or £1,500 a year should be enough for minor comforts!

A few days later the worst seemed to have happened. She was to be married in October.

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[July 16 1886.]

MY DEAR MARY,

I shall consider you have decided and cease to regret as much as I can, but if you can come to me after October (is it?) you will find me, come next Saturday and after never! unless your prospects fall through—I shall always feel you are the one in whom I have felt the greatest confidence.

SIGNOR

Nothing had been decided after all. Mary wrote in the margin of his letter at the beginning: 'Why beloved Signor, why?' That Saturday he proposed. And they decided that they would not see each other till she had made up her mind. But he could not help writing.

L.H.H. Melbury Road, W.

July 23, 1886.

DEAR MARY,

I did not intend to write to you again as it was agreed you were to sweep me away, at least for a time, but whether or no you will ever come to help me with my work, which after the things dedicated to the nation shall be finished, I wish to be devoted to charitable purposes, and whether or no you will be able to go on with your painting in the life that may be yours I am extremely regretful to think you are losing any chance of improvement, later it may be possible to put you in communication with the teacher I spoke of, meantime you cannot do better than try to produce in oil the qualities of your watercolour drawings, purity of tone and precision of outline, I won't add more. Do not answer but always believe me to be your's most affly

SIGNOR

Two days later Mary told him that her heart was his. 'I went to tell him', she wrote, 'that my *life* was his. There are no words for an hour like this—only tears of Joy. The noblest heart all mine, all mine.'

But no sooner had the engagement been decided upon than he began to be filled with doubts and fears.

Sunday, Aug. 8th, 1886.

I wrote a hasty line dear Mary on Saturday to catch the post that you might not be vexed at finding I had called at the studio, I did not touch upon certain alarms caused by your letter, I cannot help thinking from what you say your family and perhaps especially the part of it you most care for would find me nothing but a jarring element. While rejecting nothing worthy of reverence and approaching nothing so worthy with

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presumption, as I think my work shows, at the same time I belong to the class that cannot help asserting a right to an independent range of reason, not claiming to be on their level, my mind has kinship with Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold and their fellows, who are led by Thought, and by whom Thought is led. You will see how far this is likely to be in harmony with those you most care for; and will ponder well *even now* while it is time, work is for while it is day, 'for the night cometh' and reflection is for while it can bear fruit that *can be gathered*. The night comes when it is too late for work, and reflection may come too late to be of service!

I cannot contemplate any break between you and those you are bound to by ties of love and kindred, nothing would compensate to you for this. The *subject*¹ for disapproval to which you allude (and which I must forever decline to discuss even with you!) is one that cannot be denied or explained away, this much I will here add about it, the legal measure was not suggested by me, nor ever would have been so. It is for you to consider whether any set off can be sufficient to compensate for possible estrangement which might arise out of serious disapproval, do not let anything blind you to the pain of such a state of things, there is yet time!

I shall expect you on Tuesday as early as you like.

Mary wrote to ask whether he was really sure. His reply came quickly.

Sept 1st, 1886.

MY DEAR MARY,

Come as early as you can and go away when most convenient, and especially don't be a Goose! I thought it was understood that we should trust each other *utterly*, I shall always so trust you, do not let us have either doubt or fear, or any uncertainty as far as regards ourselves or our endeavours, come early,

SIGNOR

In September Watts went to a country house for a few days with 'the faithful Emma to instruct the cook'! while Mary visited her brother Edward at her old home on Loch Ness. Her visit was sadly marred by her three-year-old nephew's fall from a pony.

Aldourie,

Inverness, N.B.

Sept 15, 1886.

MY DEAR SIGNOR . . .

I did long for you this evening about seven o'clock, the sun had gone down sometime, but the sky was still yellow at the back of the hills,

¹ His first marriage.

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the wind was dropping so there were great patches of calm on the loch, when fifteen little brown sail boats came up suddenly, some of the herring fleet going West again after the East coast fishing. They had taken to their oars as they passed through with sails still set, and it was a bonny sight, and sound. This passing of boats under the great quiet hills is such a good variety, especially as the loch is narrow, almost like a river just here, and so things come quite near . . .

The roots of my heart are very deep in here and everything seems so kindly. I walk about and try to let it all know what a happy woman I am and that I am going to a life that is quite as beautiful though it is in London . . .

I want when you take me to be just a sort of pillow that helps you to rest, and perhaps something more, too, but *not an anxiety*. And I think I can promise you to do without any luxuries, even comforts if it is necessary, for getting into debt is worse than having too little to eat! It will be best to begin as if we are much poorer than we are. It is so easy to increase expenses . . .

Yrs, MARY

Aldourie,
Inverness N.B.

Sept 20, 1886.

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

I have just heard of you from Gerry,¹ who seems to have been making great love to you, without asking for leave . . . I daresay the little steamer will go suddenly past here with a letter about it for me tomorrow. I shall look at her with hope . . .

I am very well, and old bodies in the cottages about pay me compliments, so I think I must be fatter. I have no doubts except some very tiny little occasional ones, about what I can be to you, and they must by the nature of things continue to exist. I am wondering much what I shall find on the canvases when I am next with you.

Good night beloved Signor,

Your loving MARY

L.H.H.

Sept 21, 1886.

MY DEAR MARY . . .

I shall be disappointed if you do not bloom out like a flower that is transplanted into favourable soil. I want you to feel, if I do not profess the

¹ Miss Geraldine Liddell, the sister of Mary's brother-in-law. She was a delightful companion and played to Watts whom she called 'Lamb'. One day when he became impatient she cried: 'Don't be a goose, Lamb!'

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passionate feeling which would not be becoming to my age, I can love you very much with the love that joins itself closely round goodness and had its roots deep down in perfect trust, and that the door of your cage shall be wide open and there shall be no wires but silver films instead! . . .

Gerry turned up again yesterday . . . I wonder if you would have been jealous if you had seen her hug me? I think not.

SIGNOR

Aldourie,

Inverness, N.B.

Sept 23, 1886.

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

Thank you my beloved Signor for all you say. What you give me—I mean the kind of love—is like everything else I have ever got from you, just what I want. I do want to be perfectly trusted. I do better when I am—if I am held cheap I become so. I hope and believe you will find me though *very* imperfect, very ignorant, and very different from the clever women you have had for your friends, at least as big hearted, and as true as any. . . . I am a good deal dependent on the atmosphere I live in, and years seem only to make me more aware of its effects for good or for evil. I think it has been one reason to prevent my accepting a sort of medium happiness in married life, for I knew I should be deeply impressed by the intimate life, and have had fears of taking an impress from a lower type than my ideals. I have no fears now.

I am very glad to think Gerry's having been to you again. That you understood her, and she understands you is one of my greatest joys. I won't promise that everybody shall be able to make such love to you without a twinge of jealousy!

Goodnight. Your loving

MARY

You see I have broken out into saying 'loving'. I am that chiefly and it ought to include a very great deal. You don't mind do you as it is quite true?

L.H.H.

Sept 26, 1886.

MY LOVING MARY!

. . . You say you are 'ignorant'. Well, so am I, you will find this is so—but it will not matter, we will try to develop the best of all knowledge, how to spend our lives in understanding our duties, and endeavouring to live as becomes human creatures with *at least a possible* future . . . I don't

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think I have anything at all to say so if I merely subscribe myself Signor, you will know what to add.

Mary's nephew having got better now had a relapse. Watts sent grapes which he had ripened on a wall in his garden.

L.H.H.

Sep 28, 1886.

MY LOVING MARY!

... Emma will send you some more grapes. If they are not very good they will have the interest of coming from your own vine! Fancy! I expect you to do a good deal in the scrap of garden. Fancy! I had three ripe peaches out of it! I don't think I have ever been so proud of anything in my life.

Aldourie,

Inverness, N.B.

Sept 28, 1886.

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

... I shall have to look back over your letters and make a little list of all you say you are that I may not mislead people by extravagant descriptions—ignorant, irritable, penurious. I can remember straight off! It is funny I can find my ideal and all I want in such sad things.

I want to send you a grey thistle that grows here, not wild, but in the shrubberies. It is so graceful, but at present I can't find a long box to put them in. No one seems to have an old 'corset' box and yet we all wear them!

Edward is sending you a little offering of game—'various'—black cocks—grouse and partridges.

He thinks that will express better than a letter from him would that he is glad about my great happiness and proud of my prince of painters. ... Goodnight.

Your loving,

MARY

L.H.H.

Oct. 3rd, 1886.

MY LOVING MARY,

... The thistles are indeed beautiful, I think if I were in Scotland (I wonder whether I shall ever see it?) I think I could make a picture of the purple mountains in the deepening twilight with nothing for foreground but a group of these beautiful thistles. Wouldn't it be very Scotch?

Monday. Writing as I await with impatience a letter. The post brings no letter, I am anxious and alarmed.

SIGNOR

MARY FRASER TYTLER

L.H.H.

Oct 5th, 1886.

MY LOVING MARY!

The alterations in the Iron house [a studio of corrugated iron in the garden at 6 Melbury Road] are to be put in hand immediately. Everything is being got ready to be put up. When you let your studio it will be ready for your properties, indeed I daresay I could stow them away now at any moment. Are you getting frightened? I am afraid you hardly realise what you are undertaking, 'not all beer and skittles' as the Navy said of 'life'—but you are in for it and must make the best of it . . .

SIGNOR

The next day Watts heard that Mary's nephew had died. Already a large proportion of their letters had been taken up with his illness. Now they were both plunged in grief.

L.H.H.

Oct 8th, 1886.

DEAR AND POOR MARY,

I feel too acutely the sorrow that has fallen upon the Home at Aldourie to be able to say a word on the subject. I cannot help the sensation that at such a moment I am an intruder and should not be thought about or remembered, I realise that two lives are for ever changed and shadowed. The pity of it!

I hardly like to say and yet I must, now that you have this experience of nursing and of sorrow, whether you are doing a wise thing for yourself in extending the range of interests and possible sorrows! No one can escape them but there may be some you can still avoid. I am making a design which hereafter may be lovingly worked into a monument, The Angel of Death with a child in her lap on whose head she is placing a circlet, of Death the Angel crowning Innocence. I should like to say much but do not know how.

SIGNOR

[Aldourie,

Inverness. N.B.]

Saturday night [Oct 9, 1886.]

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

You are very good to me and I like to be able to read some of the things you say to my dearest ones here—they feel very much touched by your thoughts of them. I long and long to see the angel and child. . . . You are quite wrong in thinking that you are anything but a comforter, even to the most sorely stricken . . .

MARY FRASER TYTLER

There is another suggestion in your letter to which I can say nothing, but ask you Do you *believe* I love you? 'Many Waters Cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.'

Your loving MARY

L.H.H.

Oct 13, 1886.

LOVING MARY,

I do not doubt your love but that is the more reason why I should wish to save you from any pain and disappointment, especially as I must know that what you so abundantly give me is founded on a mistaken estimate, but I will not in this letter speak of it . . .

SIGNOR

Aldourie,

[Inverness, N.B.]

[Oct 13, 1886.]

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

. . . I am [not] frightened by your telling me how disappointed I am to be. I expect nothing! Will that do? At least only one thing, to be allowed to mark your pocket-handkerchiefs 'Signor' in the palette, reproduced in embroidery cotton! I think it would be so neat. You would have to sign it large and clear on a bit of paper and then I would work it!

I know I want to put my head down upon your shoulder, Signor, to-night and say nothing and hear all I need. Instead I must go and get what comfort I can from a pillow. Goodnight.

Yr loving

MARY

In his next letter Watts tried to reconcile Mary to the little boy's death. He ended: 'I feel very dull and uncomfortable and want you very much. It is long since you were here. Signor. I like you to long to lay your head on my shoulder and say nothing; I think that will suit us both best.'

L.H.H.

Oct 18, 1886.

LOVING MARY AND DEAR WIFE,

for so I always think of you nor could twenty ceremonies make you more so to me. . . . You shall do what you like with the gallery [she had suggested alterations] and I shall only be too delighted to have it turned to some good account. The gallery and house and indeed all matters outside my studio will be turned over absolutely to you. I wish the time were come. . . .

SIGNOR

MARY FRASER TYTLER

Inverness,
Forres, N.B.
Oct 19, 1886.

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

. . . How can you ask me if the thought of being yours has been a comfort all this time. I sometimes think [that if the] desire of [my heart] was taken from me now I could not live. Don't be afraid that I expect too much. I know quite well what I possess and do not suffer from too much imagination! . . . Goodnight my own Signor.

Your loving MARY

But he was still afraid she did not realise what she was undertaking. Fears that it all might go wrong possessed him. 'I rather feel this', he ended, 'the more just now that I have a bad cold and feel what a nuisance I could be.'

Inverness
Forres, N.B.
Oct 21, [1886]

MY DEAR SIGNOR,

. . . I see you still doubt my poor little love being anything real. I feel like St. Peter and I think I have been questioned more than three times, 'Lovest thou me?' and he was grieved. . . . If there is one thing that I feel has come to me late, one thing I feel has been worth waiting and longing for all the while, it is that now I have [confidence] in you—'roots deep down in perfect trust'—you *said*, and I feel.

L.H.H.
Oct 23, 1886.

I have just got your letter. My doubts, dear Mary *and beloved wife* were never as to your power or will to be everything to me, but as to whether you might not have been misled by your imagination or want of that positive knowledge which of course you could not have. But we will have no doubts but endeavour to shape our lives in accordance with the religious teaching which is free from the puzzling conditions with which we will have nothing to do. This teaching is found in two utterances—The sermon on the mount, and Paul's epistle 'Though I speak with the tongues of angels, yet . . .' Guided by these we may with all reverence and humanity make our lives acceptable in spite of ignorance and failures. . . .

Mary was on her way to London and in the train she wrote: 'I think I shall ask you not to think too much about what I shall like or dislike in the life that is to be mine. Only keep before you that I love you enough to

MARY FRASER TYTLER

feel all details unimportant by the side of the one, that I am going to live with you—and if you think of that as my supreme delight you will know that with it as the outcome of love I shall probably learn to be what you need.'

Up to this time the engagement had been kept a secret. Watts felt that his lady friends would be jealous, and he did not like the world to know of his intentions unless he was quite sure they could be put into practice. But with Mary's return to London, he began to let a few people know. Mrs. Barrington had of course wormed the secret out of somebody or other long before and was rather distant. But she considered that if she had managed to dominate Watts by himself it was possible that she could do the same when he was married, for his future wife looked very meek. Other friends were genuinely delighted.

L.H.H.

Oct 24th, 1886.

MY DEAR LITTLE WIFE,

I hope you will come pretty early on Tuesday. I am not very well and cling very much to you. This does not look like doubting *you*! Signor.

In my announcements I have purposely refrained from any expressions of sentimentality dwelling upon the selfish side of the question on my part. You must not mind that! Mrs. Leslie Stephen says, Why delay. Persuade Miss Fraser Tytler to marry and carry you off out of the fogs. How do you like the advice?

I have written to Mrs. Prinsep. She is stopping with May Hitchens. I almost wish you could find it in your heart to write to Mrs. Prinsep and say in your own way you wish she could look upon you as a sort of daughter. Poor thing she is in a bad state of health and things have gone very ill with her for many years past. She has a Thousand good qualities though impulsive and not at all prudent. I fear being ill and ill at ease she may feel that somehow I am deserting the family with which I have been identified for some seven and thirty years, more than the time you have been in the world! I know you can never wish I should even *seem* to be inconstant and ungrateful!

... Although I have made the matter so far known I particularly wish it should not be made more public—reasons I think good.

Watts was not at all well. 'I am sadly in want of a good deal of petting and coddling', he wrote. Unbiased friends were suggesting that an early marriage would help both of them. Mary planned a honeymoon in Egypt. Mrs. Barrington, of course, inferred that Watts was mad to entrust himself to such untried hands.

MARY FRASER TYTLER

Mounthill, Epsom.

[Nov 6th, 1886.]

MY DEAR AND BELOVED,

I had such a happy day yesterday—I nearly cried over it last night—There are sort of harmonies going on in my life now, that I thought did not belong to this world at all—

It is my colour angel that has led me to them—

Do you remember my dream? It was a good omen surely? Such years ago—I think I must tell it to you again.

I was in a glorious cathedral quite alone—and thinking I had never seen anything so beautiful—when an angel came to me and said, So you think this beautiful?—it is much more beautiful above—I will show you—and we went up to a sort of clerestory—very high almost on a line with the vaulted roof—and down its long vista I looked and saw not form though it was there, but the most marvellous harmonies of colour—only to be dreamt of—and could not help, from pure wonder, going down upon my knees—and the moment I had done so—I felt a hand—and it was yours and behind me *you!*—I dreamt that 12 years ago and never forget or alter it a bit.

Such a scrawl—till Monday.

Yr MARY

When they met Watts told her of his hearing the beating of wings and the cry: 'Anima mia, anima mia' in his studio at Charles Street. 'You are touched by my dream!' he wrote after she had left, 'which was no dream, an impression who knows of how much reality! Was it think you your soul seeking its fellow? It would have been in the year 49, about the time you came into the world. How do you like the idea?'

Mary was now perfecting her plans for the wedding and honeymoon. She booked cabins for Egypt. Watts was seriously frightened by her resolution.

Nov 12th.

MY DARLING MARY,

I know you will be the best wife any man ever had and unless I lose my sense I will always do what you wish but you must let me keep my eye on my cherished projects. I shall send the cheque for the cabins by Emma tomorrow, but you must make all as I said elastic even if I forfeit the greater part of the money.

Nov 13th.

MY DEAREST MARY,

I send this after you to impress upon you to make the arrangements with P. & O. as elastic as possible. I cannot and indeed I will not go if I

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have the remains of any chill upon me. If I can get on board well (for me) I shall not fear, but if I am not quite free from cough and weakness of throat nothing shall induce me to go. I do not want to leave you a widow, nor can I consent to losing my chance of carrying out my cherished national designs. . . .

. Mrs. Barrington had met Mary in the hall of 6 Melbury Road and told her that Watts would die on the voyage. A furious quarrel had ensued. But Mary saw that once and for all she would have to be resolute. And she did not swerve from her purpose.

Meantime the news of the engagement was slowly circulating. Andrew Hitchens, a stockbroker married to Mrs. Prinsep's niece, wrote in a way that must have made Mary a little awed at the task she had set herself. 'I should say that no other woman I know deserves or is fitted for the trust she undertakes. It is a serious, solemn, and sacred thing which she has to do.' What if he *should* die on the voyage? And Mrs. Barrington should be right. But she put fears aside and continued with her plans.

On November 19th the Fraser Tytlers assembled at the house of Mary's step-mother at Epsom. Her favourite brother had written: 'Tell us when you know the date, and Ted and I will be there to give you to the nation.' Watts, in a suppressed state of nerves, arrived with Gerry Liddell after lunch. He went for a walk with Mary in the afternoon and then retired to his room. That evening before he went to bed Emma and Mary both tried to unlace one of his boots. A little tearful quarrel made up with kisses ensued. Next day Watts and Mary were married, and went to Melbury Road, 'to *my* home with *my* beloved', wrote Mary in her diary. Five days later they set sail for Egypt. Leighton saw them off and looked very doubtfully at Mary. Mrs. Barrington was one of his intimate friends.

X

MARRIAGE

After a short stay at Malta, Watts and his newly-married wife arrived in Egypt. It had not been an altogether successful voyage, particularly at first when the warning of his friends seemed to be coming true. He caught cold and was very depressed. Probably he was worrying about his marriage. Nell Terry had been twenty-four years younger than himself, Mary was thirty. How could Mary fit in with his special invalid routine? He repeated the arguments to himself.

But little by little doubts were banished. In Mary's presence uncertainties seemed to have no substance. There was something so sweet and unassuming, yet at the same time so strong about her nature that he could not but see that she was the right person. She was tranquil and tireless. Every personal motive was put aside in order that she should be of use to him. Another woman might have resented being called his nurse, particularly by himself, but she accepted the position as if it were an honour. She was like a mother to him, and yet a mother who was also his child. In matters of the spirit or intellect she listened to him as she might have listened to a god. But in mundane affairs she was much more of a man than he. She quickly learnt to soften the little hardships for him and straighten out the tangles that might upset his nerves.

Never was there a more selfless love than hers. She would get up in the night from sleep to jot down a thought that might come to him. He had got into the habit ever since the papers had begun to ask for his thoughts on life. Fortunately Mary was very strong. All she asked was to live for him and to serve him.

Mary realised the delicacy of her task. To marry a great Victorian of Watts' age involved difficulties, especially where friends of long standing were concerned. With a tact that could only have come from strict self-discipline Mary effaced herself. She deliberately gave the impression that her only duty was to look after his health, but in reality she did very much more. Casually she might not appear to have a strong character. But at the core of her there was a will of steel, and it was bent on doing one thing—helping her painter.

To the outside world Mary's marriage may have seemed a sad thing. Admittedly she was not as young as she had been but she was fresh and

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lively—a little quiet perhaps, but with the blush of youth still about her. And here she was yoking herself to an invalid of sixty-nine who was a good deal of a nervous case. On the other hand, to others (perhaps not untinged with jealousy) Mary appeared to be doing well for herself. Her family, though distinguished, was impoverished. What could be more vulgarly advantageous than to marry an old man nearly twice her age and live for the rest of her life on his fame and money?

But to Mary her marriage was the most wonderful thing that could happen to her. No other romance could be quite like hers. Her Signor was her life, existence was interpreted by him. With him all that was dark and doubtful became radiantly clear. It was a joy of joys to be allowed to help her guide. She loved him with an all consuming yet a still passion. In her youth her natural affection had been stifled. Her nature, so warm and clear and loving needed but an object for it to unfold itself and grow to its fulness. And with Signor it did.

Once they had safely arrived in Egypt all went well. There was the unforgettable scene at Suez when Mary and Signor looked out from the hotel over the calm expanse of the gulf, the Sinaitic range beside it to where a little boat lay moored. A man stood motionless in it. Suddenly from a minaret came the cry: 'God is great, God is great, I witness that there is no God but God.' The figure in the boat made a gesture of prayer and prostrated itself. Night fell.

They hired a diohabeah to go up the Nile. Watts got rid of his cough, and he would sit on the deck and watch the fellaheen or listen to the songs of other boatmen with something of the intoxication he had felt on his first arrival in Italy. The kites that wheeled overhead appeared to him to be unconsciously tracing the lines of some majestic composition, he told Mary enthusiastically, and she lovingly recorded it in her diary. One day watching the superb physique of the fellaheen he told her: 'Sanity and balance are required to carry all great gifts to perfection. In Shelley's character, for instance, there is a loss of manly stability, the result of his ultra artistic temperament.'¹ There were expeditions to temples and tombs, a visit to the Pyramids and the Sphinx. And all the time by his side there was Mary tirelessly reading to him when he was out of sorts, soothing his nerves, and helping him by her questions to disentangle his thoughts.

After Egypt they travelled to Athens and Constantinople, thence homeward by sea. The day after their return 'the sun rose clear of cloud behind Sir Frederick Leighton's chimneys,' Mary wrote, 'and as early as he could Signor went over there to find his friend. And now the peaceful life in art began for me. From my window in "Paradise Row", when I

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 69.

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awoke at dawn, I looked out upon the fresh green of the trees of the neighbouring gardens that met round our own, where song-birds and wood pigeons were common, and the red and white hawthorns were full of flower. There was a little first breakfast together in the studio when the light was still dim and the only sound in Melbury Road was the lamp-lighter's step on his way to turn out the street lights. Then, looking up from my letters, I would see Signor's light figure turning quickly from canvas to canvas, every movement full of enthusiasm and the expression of earnest endeavour. And round and about the big designs stood filling the room with an impression indescribably serene.

'I should not have dared to invade him at that time but that my invitation came. I was told I was not to get up unless I liked it; but, he added, "It will be very nice if you can"; and so we were there till seven; then the real toilet for the day followed, and the real breakfast at eight. Breakfast was in a room we called the dining room, but it was in fact the ante-room to the gallery, and with it was open to the public on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. And so we found ourselves breakfasting with some twenty pictures around us, and when I wanted to boast, I could point to my "dado of Watts portraits". For, in fact, the dado of that dining room was the background for his portraits of the great men of the day, his destined gift to the nation. Sometimes the gallery doors were wide open, and from the cool north breakfast room one looked into sunlight playing upon all that the gallery held of colour and of line. But the pleasure of it was all mine, for he, more often than not, stood there sad and disappointed, saying "I wonder how it is that I cannot do what I want."'¹

But there were difficulties. There was Mrs. Barrington to deal with. She took Mary for an inexperienced little thing who would let her continue to visit in much the same way as she had done before the marriage. But good judge of character though she often was, she quite misjudged Mary. At first they were distantly polite. But when Mrs. Barrington came wandering in through the gate in the hedge at all hours an open quarrel was unavoidable. Mary would grow red in the face and leave the room. She said little to Watts, but he saw that a state of affairs in which Mary would be interrupted as she read aloud to him could not be allowed to continue. Soon after his return he went out in the garden and put a wedge in the gate through which Mrs. Barrington liked to pass. If she came by the front door her visits would lose their intimacy—or so he must have calculated. But Mrs. Barrington was not the person to stick at a wedge. When she saw it she immediately forced it out and threw it away. And her visits continued as usual.

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, pp. 83, 84.

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Watts found her personality so alarmingly oppressive that he dared not speak openly to her. And so matters dragged on, and might have continued to do so had not the Watts's noticed that some of their old friends, Gertrude Mead among them, gave up visiting. At first Watts was extremely puzzled to account for it, until at last the coldness was traced to the influence of Mrs. Barrington. Very fussed by the thought of such an unpleasant situation and fearing the open hostility of his neighbours, Watts wrote secretly to Mrs. Barrington's friends asking them to use their influence with her. This, however, does not seem to have been successful for we find him complaining that stories had been circulated about Mary's 'treatment of a manservant.' As the man in question had absconded with Watts' signed editions of Ruskin but had nevertheless been allowed to keep his place until he found another job, the rumour was entirely without foundation and could only have come from the man himself. This roused Watts sufficiently to write to Mrs. Barrington. He stated his grievance in the strongest terms. He described her visits as forcing Mary to do 'violence to her feelings.' How Mrs. Barrington received the letter we do not know. At all events, the situation was clarified and she agreed, most unwillingly no doubt, to visit only at certain stated times when Mary could leave the house.

For holidays the Watts would often stay with Andrew Hitchens and his wife in their comfortable country house on the Hogs Back near Guildford. Hitchens was a stockbroker and Conservative, but he had an intense veneration for Watts. He did not pretend to understand him and regarded him as a sort of National treasure whom it was incumbent upon him to foster. He did what he could in the tiresome financial arrangements that were always cropping up when there were pictures to be sold.

One winter Mary and Signor stayed throughout all the foggy months that might have been unhealthy in London. It involved a lot of organisation on Mary's part. There was all the painting paraphernalia as well as countless mufflers, jerseys, mittens and medicines to be packed and unpacked. Once settled in, Watts enjoyed rambling in the woods. He would be at his most characteristic. With his wide-brimmed hat of soft felt, and the long Inverness cape which he unconsciously arranged in artistic folds with his fingers as he walked along, he would talk of every subject under the sun. His conversation was often serious and earnest, but he would sometimes surprise Mary at his knowledge of everyday things. She would sometimes trick him into forgetting for a while the demon that goaded him to spend himself in work from dawn to dusk. Probably he was never so much at his ease, so confident of himself and his powers as he was at this time.

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The regular serenity of his life which Mary gave him rounded his personality. To his contemporaries he seemed just a little larger than life size. The young Watts with the flowing hair or the artistic young man with the moustache and imperial are Watts unfinished, and the middle-aged painter of Little Holland House is unfinished too. He did not quite possess enough of that 'monumentalism' so much prized by the Pattles. But now in his seventies he began to grow more and more into the part his contemporaries expected him to play. In his skull cap and his white smock, at work, or in a loose fitting coat seated in a claret-coloured arm-chair sipping coffee after lunch, he almost seemed to have turned into Titian. The very lines of his face suggested the Venetian—at all events it was said that if he did not exactly resemble his master he seemed at least to have stepped from one of his canvases.

Life seemed, at last, to be drawing to its close with rosy sunset hues. He was as vigorous as ever under Mary's calm influence. But there was one thing he lacked—a home in the country. He realised how much he needed it when there was all the packing and confusion to be sorted out on arrival at the Hitchens'. And it would have been pleasant to return to one's own hearth after a ramble with Mary in the Surrey woods. It fussed him greatly to think of the trouble and expense he caused when staying away. He was on what was known as the Salisbury diet which entailed minced undercooked beef and lots of cream. And there were certain times of the day when he had to put his legs up and certain times when he had to go for walks. Often he feared he might be ill when he was away. In addition, if he had a home of his own in the country he could have a studio as large as he wanted with as many canvases as he liked round him to work at. Staying away he was cramped for space.

And how Mary longed for a place of her own. 6 Melbury Road was a paradise to her. But it was not altogether hers. She was mistress of it, but there were people living nearby who had once known it far better than she did. They could talk of times when she had known Watts only very slightly. There was, for instance, Mrs. Barrington, who we may be sure did not hide the relish she felt for a joke, the nature of which required a length of friendship with Watts far longer than Mary possessed. 6 Melbury Road had been a dream house because it was Signor's. Now, in the insatiable appetite of her love, she wanted another house, a home that no-one else should have been consulted about, a home that she should have built her Signor. She had to wait a little time for her dream to grow real, but in the end the country house did come into being.

On their walks at the foot of the Hog's Back Watts and Mary used to pass through a little wood whose hollows in Spring were filled with



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primroses and bluebells. Just beyond it there was a sandy pine-crested hill with big chestnuts and beeches growing on its slopes. The trees on the top swished poetically in the wind. It was a favourite spot of Mary's. She would take a rug and as the two of them lay there, Signor well wrapped up, she would gaze into the Scotch firs and think of her home. There was heather and heath all round. Signor, too, loved the place and was quite childish in the delight he took in listening to the wind in the boughs. Indeed it was a romantic spot. One could look down through the trees into dim glades and leafy caverns of green. There were great oaks at the foot of the knoll one side and beeches on the other. The wild flowers enchanted them. Signor who had a passion for the plain things of the earth—he felt akin to them he said—was enraptured even with the brambles. One day as a soft wind blew through the trees their poetic hearts planned to build their new home there.

After some hesitation it was decided. What could be more wonderful an omen than that it was not necessary to cut down one single tree in order to build the house? Both Mary and Signor were convinced of the sanctity of Nature. It was found, however, that an extremely old tree which had been blasted by lightning would stand only a few yards from the garden door. The architect and builder pointed out that in a high wind it might easily fall on the house. But the Watts' faith in nature was great and, sure enough, one night some years after the house was completed the old tree settled down almost unheard without disturbing anyone.

The house was called *Limnerslease*, or painter's house. First of all it started as a thatched cottage, and in the architect's drawing there were white painted nobbles on which it was hoped pigeons would perch, for the little wood was full of their sound in the spring and summer. But gradually with new requirements the design altered and what had started as a small Surrey cottage ended much more ambitiously. When it was finished it was a pleasant enough country place with a tile roof more like *The Briary* than 6 *Melbury Road*. Of course there were the various crises as the building arose, which fussed Watts a great deal, but which in fact did him a lot of good. He grew very cross indeed when the staircase was forgotten. He sold some chalk drawings in *Bond Street* to pay for the cost, and he only once lost heart. When he saw the naked half-finished structure he decided that the walls which were to have been properly half timbered should have instead mock boards of oak between stucco. And he made Mary promise that she would not buy any expensive furniture.

The interior of *Limnerslease* did not indeed give the impression of great wealth, and most of the pieces were never in fashion: The furniture was an ill-assorted lot bought in second hand shops, but its poverty was

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hidden by pieces of rich needlework and rugs draped about the rooms. And of course the place soon took on that mysterious indefinable air of culture and high living which Watts gave to every house he lived in. This atmosphere was partly due to the fine pictures, both his own and those which he had brought back with him from Italy, partly no doubt to Mary's good taste which demanded perfection in the arrangement of flowers—a bowl took anything up to an hour. But mostly the atmosphere of Limnerslease baffled enquirers as to what it consisted of. Though there was comfort, there was no laziness, and it was obvious to even a casual visitor to the house that a picture or statue was prized far higher than a sofa or chair.

The main feature was of course a gigantic studio which looked down into the wood. In comparison the little living room which gave off the hall was very cramped. It was known as the Red Room because the walls, following Watts' theory that oil paintings look best on a rich background, were painted that colour. The great feature of the room was the niche where Signor lay when Mary read to him. He had been getting a little deaf for some time and found it difficult to catch every word when he was being read to. Mary therefore had the ingenious idea of using an angular cavity in the wall as a sound trap. A couch covered with crimson silk was placed in the niche and Signor would lie there and hear everything she said. Soon after the niche was made it occurred to Mary that Signor had a very bare view as he lay looking upwards. She decided it should be decorated. With boundless energy she set to work with tow and plaster. The design was copied from Celtic art and every line was symbolic of some spiritual doctrine. The whole was finally carefully painted in deep sombre blues and old golds which gave the place a strange funereal Burne-Jones quality. Watts looked more like a mummified god than anything else as he lay there. It was a rare privilege for a visiting adorer or inquisitive journalist to see him stretched out in his shrine with a delicate cup of coffee by his side.

The staircase at Limnerslease was hung with dark photographs of the Sistine Chapel, the frames lapping over each other. Even so, many had to be housed in dressing-rooms and lavatories. It must have struck a visitor as curious that a household with such obvious sensibility to art should be content with such a crowd of darkening pictures. But the Watts's were not people who believed in beauty for beauty's sake: it was the stimulating effect of the pictures on Signor's imagination that caused them to be well loved and almost daily studied. The venerable old man would pause on the stairs and in appraising the worth of an arm would formulate a theory of form. At the next opportunity he would jot down his thought on the

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back of an envelope, to be carefully pasted into a large notebook by Mary. Like his father he loved theories and experiments.

But life at Limnerslease though primarily devoted to High Art was not without its everyday pleasures. For the first time Watts was able to indulge in a stable and coachman of his own. Mary and he would ride up a sandy lane where, it was said, pilgrims had passed on their way to St. Martha's. He was still a good horseman and took a keen interest in his stable. Every morning the coachman would knock at the studio door, a little conversation would take place, and orders for the day would be given.

In this way, up in his studio he did not feel so cut off from the world outside as he had done at Melbury Road. The rides went on regularly after his eightieth birthday until with youthful inquisitiveness he insisted on trying to ride one of the new bicycles. The coachman held the machine and pushed him about. Unfortunately he tumbled off and ruptured himself so that the rides up the Pilgrim's Way had to be stopped. These rides had not been altogether agreeable to his companions especially if they were inexpert. Watts would become annoyingly didactic about the correct way of doing this and that quite ordinary action.

There were, however, less strenuous employments. There was a good deal of planting to do. 'But the little bits of gardening he did himself in the wood', Mary wrote, 'were his chief interests, and he was very happy when, wearing a strong pair of gardening gloves, he pruned back tangles of bramble and thorn with a reaping-hook, no one else being trusted to do this for fear too much of the beauty of wild nature should be lost: and quietly from a full heart he said "How I do enjoy this life."' ¹

Meanwhile Mary was not without friends or influence in the neighbourhood. Her sister, who had married a saintly and eccentric canon, lived in the neighbouring village, and the two of them would delight in moral and religious discussions. An inexhaustible topic was the relationship between Christianity and nature, and generally the conversation would turn on some theory of Tolstoi² for whom their admiration was almost boundless. In the evenings or early in the morning before it was light Mary would tell Signor what she had said and what her sister had replied. Gradually a project formed in her mind. What if she should try and return to Nature? Of course it could not be a return all at once. Signor could never have stood it. But he was very much in love with the idea of creating a body of opinion opposed to the materialism of the age. He was, therefore, wholeheartedly behind Mary when bit by bit she unfolded to him a scheme

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 198.

² Watts in an unusually caustic mood remarked that Tolstoi had the milk of human kindness in his head when it should have been in his heart.

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of building a pottery at the foot of the knoll upon which Limnerslease stood.

The scheme started with the niche she had decorated in the Red Room. The next step was to decorate the ceiling, and finally to start a class for modelling in clay. All the local people came to these classes. In the evening the villagers from Compton would come, in the afternoons the squire would sometimes drive over in his carriage. From these classes Mary devised a scheme to build a mortuary chapel for the village. The chapel was of her own design and was to be a really co-operative effort. Local clay was dug up, a furnace built, and each member of the class directed to do a special bit of work. Thus the coachman was entrusted with the modelling of angel faces to go over the doorway. When the chapel was completed it was a fantastic erection. The local clay, contrary to expectation, burnt a bright red which time has never toned. The walls and roof are enormously thick and somewhat resemble Egyptian architecture. A cloister nearby follows an Italian design and there is a Pre-Raphaelite well head. But the most extraordinary feature of the chapel is the symbolism. Almost every brick is adorned with a head, a leaf, a flower, or other Celtic symbol. The interior is decorated with tow and plaster. Trees of life and angels of death in deep blue dresses twine upward to the roof. Gilt wings and silver souls are confused in the green foliage. It is all extraordinarily remote from the very English elm crowned hill outside. The completion of the chapel made Mary more ambitious. She decided to train up the promising boys in her modelling class to be potters. They were given a school house and a thatched building was built for them. Unlike many such schemes it did not peter out immediately, and the Compton pottery continues to this day.

Watts of course was too old to have much to do with these projects. It was indeed rumoured that he had been seen after his eightieth birthday slung up to the roof of the chapel in a basket. But this was not the case, and the most he had to do with the chapel was to give it a picture and open it officially in his doctor's robes. Indeed, the chapel and all the schemes of this sort were Mary's. She was playing an important rôle in the Home Arts and Industries. Watts would make the journey to the annual Exhibition whenever he was in good enough health. Moving among the stalls of Pre-Raphaelite embroideries, coarse homespuns, or extraordinary designs for jugs and pots he felt very much at home. The exhibits, so seemed to him, were practical as well as aesthetic and dealt a blow at the monster of industrialism. They inspired him to invent a grate in the shape of a basket. He was getting very old and the journey from Guildford to London fussed him a great deal. He would arrive far too early at the

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station where the station master would greet him, deferentially bowing. Once safely in the train he would fret at the thought that he might get lost on a station he did not know. On one occasion he got into the lift at the Exhibition with a lady who had a coloured bird's feather in her hat. To Watts it was dastardly cruel to kill birds for such decorations, and he turned in a fury on the unsuspecting woman. She was not at all abashed, however, for she had no idea who the rude little man could be.

Mary was very busy, for Limnerslease was growing. She bought more land and an old barn was acquired for the great statue of Tennyson Watts was completing in these years. The garden had to be laid out with shrubberies and shelters to protect Signor from the wind. Mary even made him design a bookplate and he chose as motto 'The utmost for the highest', which he declared was the best thing he had ever thought of. Before long Mary had it engraved on a sundial for the new garden near the barn. Then there was the question of where to store his pictures. As more and more of his time was spent in the country Watts needed a gallery such as he had had in London. First of all it was simply used as a storehouse, but afterwards like the gallery at Little Holland House it was opened to the public.

And so Mary built and lived in her dream house. Together they would pace through the shrubberies or walk along the old pilgrim's way deep in serious talk. How she cherished and loved her Signor! As he grew old he did not grow feeble. He almost became vain over the clearness of his mind. He loved to astonish visitors by talking of the most modern agricultural inventions. Sitting back in his claret-coloured armchair sipping coffee, or at rest in his niche, did it not seem that after all life had been very kind?

XI

LAST IMPRESSIONS

[1]

Most women, from long custom of wearing these stays, are really unaware how much they are hampered and restricted. A girl of twenty, intended by Nature to be one of her finest specimens, gravely assures one that her stays are not tight, being exactly the same size as those she was first put into, not perceiving her condemnation in the fact that she has since grown five inches in height and two in shoulder breadth. . . . A little girl of twelve being for the first time jammed into the abomination, complained that she could not breathe. The answer of her mother's French maid was "Il faut souffrir pour être belle", and so commenced the deformity of the poor child's body and mind. . . . The high heel is also a great mistake if only regarded as a matter of appearance, as it greatly increases the apparent size of the foot at a little distance, making it look like a hoof . . .¹

Such was Watts' opinion on dress when he was asked to write an article on the subject. It was greatly appreciated and soon after publication a letter arrived.

'DEAR SIR,

A party of girls here in Norwood are trying to get up a society calling itself the Anti-Tight Lacing Society, we have had some meetings etc., but much wish to have a president who will fully sympathise with our object—namely that of showing girls and others round us how wicked and ugly the fashion of tight lacing is . . .

I do not know if you know Norwood—the Crystal Palace etc., but this horrible fashion is most prevalent here. We won't have any old women or "strong minded" (so called) females, in our committee, for we want those who join to be really good advertisements of *anti* tight-lacing—I am secretary of the society. . . .

Please do not refuse your name, as President. Everyone either sneers or laughs at us, but we mean to *try* to do some good, and I hope to get some names to *sign* our petition.

Yours faithfully

GERTIE TIPPLA.'

¹ M. S. Watts, iii, p. 202, etc.

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Watts immediately complied with the secretary's request.

On other more abstruse subjects the aged painter was less convincing. 'Our conflict with the Boers', he wrote, 'may be explained as the outcome of that law which says "Forward!" The Boers stop the way—they are unprogressive: though a fine manly race they stand still, they are like children; children are delightful people, but they cannot stand all day and idle in the stream, while the stress and strife of the high way goes on beside them.'¹

To a civilian who had volunteered for the war he wrote: 'I trust you will come back safe with the splendid experience of the battlefield, compared with which every other experience must be tame. Every man who volunteers is to be envied.'²

As he grew older morality ate him up. He suggested training ships for the poorer classes moored round the coast where they could learn the noble naval traditions of our country. 'Our position', he wrote, '[is] one of great peril, only to be met by some heroic impulse permeating all classes, such as the religious revivals of the olden time or of the Turf now, when every gutter child feels a throb of excitement at the name of the favourite and the state of the odds!'³

But more often than not his ideas were simply flat. He had no conception of his celebrity and naively wrote to the Editor of *Great Thoughts*:

'SIR,

I send you to be used or not as you think fit, not what can be considered "a great thought" but a conviction experience has brought me to and which I think is not altogether without value for indeed the results of experience are generally too costly to be valueless,

"If you would know a man's character find out his estimate of others".⁴

[ii]

'Here, in his country surroundings', wrote Hilda Haking of a visit to Limnerslease, 'might we see [Watts] nearing the end of his earthly pilgrimage, serene in the peace of an intensely happy home, the loveliness of budding flower and tree. . . . The studio at Limnerslease was littered with pamphlets against that curse of England, drink, and the drink traffic, and the last portrait that he begged leave to paint was that of Lord Peel, whose noble and independent fight against this national evil had roused the great painter's deepest admiration. . . .

He seemed to inspire while speaking in his clear deliberate tones: "Think of the daisies! They always look to the sun, and so they take its shape; look

¹ M. S. Watts, iii, p. 283. ² Ibid., p. 296. ³ Ibid., p. 293.

⁴ Private collection of letters. Also letter from secretary of Anti-Tight Lacing Society.

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at their petals, like rays of light from a golden orb! And remember, we all have our message to deliver to the world. It does not matter who we are, or where we come from, we must give the message we were meant to bear.

“All the knowledge you may get from great people, all the experience you may gain, is as nothing if you cannot bring anything out of it that is of use to others. Turn to the sun, and you will always hope on, and look at the bright side. Remember the little things, too, the little duties. Think of the daisies!”

‘He would pause as he passed the beautiful terra cotta sundial in Celtic designs, given him by his wife on his birthday, with his own motto upon it, “The Utmost for the Highest”.

“That is the best thing I ever did, to think of that motto,” he said humbly. And indeed he gave his utmost.”¹

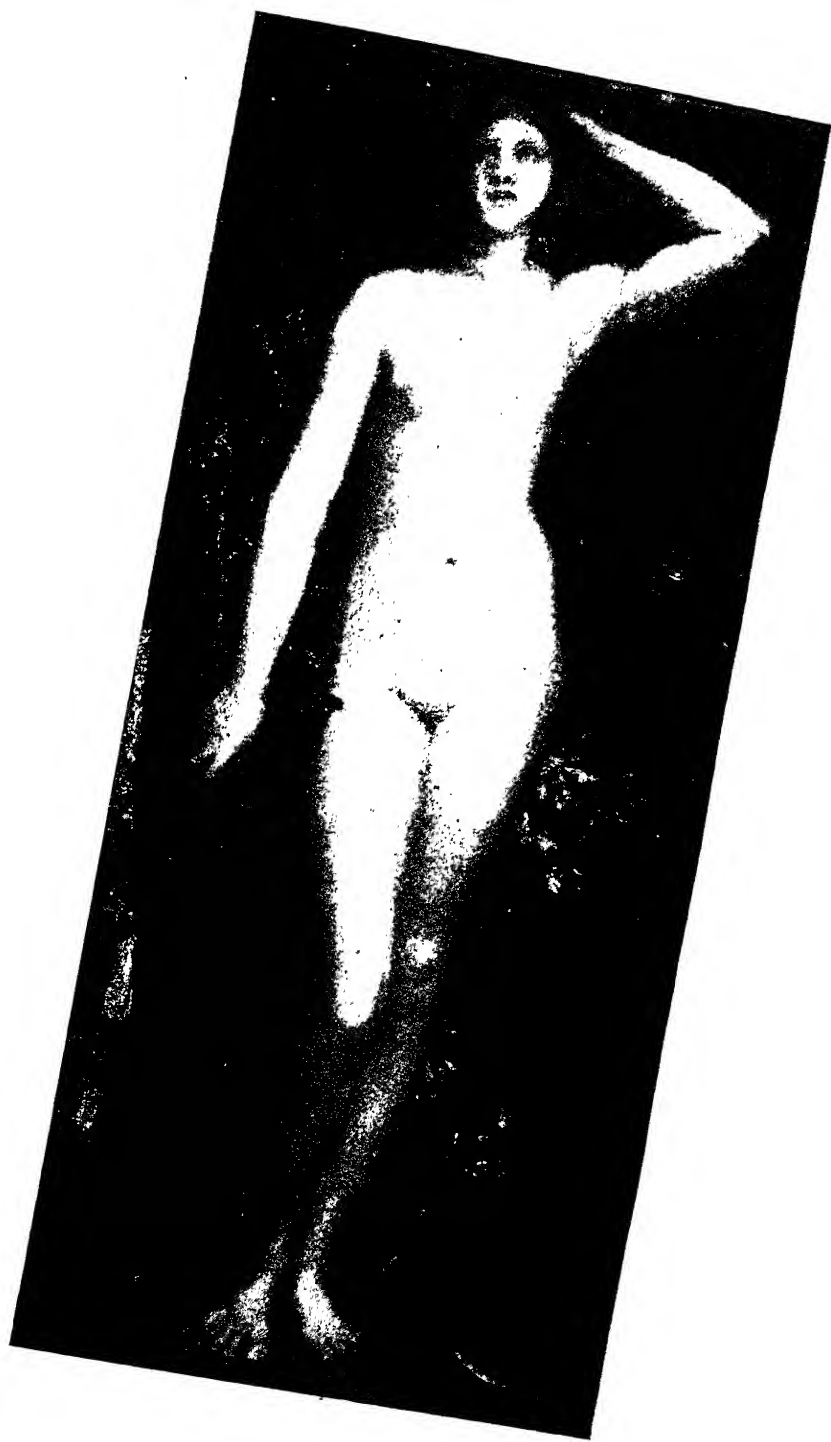
[iii]

‘Hallam Tennyson wrote’, Mary recorded, ‘to tell Signor of a desire expressed by the Master of Trinity, as representative of a committee formed for the purpose of arranging for a subscription portrait to be painted of Lord Tennyson for the hall of his old college. His father, the son wrote, was of course much disinclined to sit, and had made objections to every suggestion. He was at last reconciled by Hallam’s proposing to try to induce Signor to come down to Farringford for this purpose. To hear this pleased Signor, and made him willing also to make the effort.

‘Always dreading that on a visit illness might overtake him, and so give trouble to others, Signor decided to refuse the invitation to stay at Farringford . . . and made use of The Briary. This matter being arranged, and that other essential stipulation, that the portrait should not be undertaken professionally, we went to the Isle of Wight towards the middle of May. The Hallam Tennysons came to welcome us at Yarmouth and drive us to The Briary where we were told . . . that the poet himself had come over many times to remind [the caretakers] that as the weather had been wet the house must be well warmed!

‘Early next morning a light wind stirred the curtains, and a grey dawn showed fair and clear to prelude twelve days of almost unbroken weather—May at her best in the Isle of Wight. We pushed the French window wide open after breakfast, and went out upon the lawn. A cuckoo flew past, so close to us that his caressing note was quite distinct to Signor, as we went to look at the clematis montana he remembered being planted, which now was rampant to the roof, and for the Christmas tree he and the little people

¹ Hilda Haking: *The Shrine of George Frederick Watts, R.A.*, London, 1906, pp. 6-8.





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at The Briary had stuck into the ground seventeen years ago, now well grown and flourishing.

'We were at Farringford by eleven. Lady Tennyson greeted us as of old—even more tenderly—with eyes brimming with gratitude, and after a few minutes the poet joined us. There was talk of everything but painting, and later we all, save the dear lady on her sofa, walked back to The Briary through the sweet old-fashioned garden, gay with spring flowers. Signor and Lord Tennyson walked in front, falling naturally into their old habits, recalling the old days and stories that made them laugh. But the poet had had a letter from a stranger which had touched him where he was made most vulnerable because made poet; and he complained bitterly of the intrusive writer, working himself up so much that in the end he exclaimed in answer to Signor's remark "that such intrusions were but the cost of fame"—"I wish I have never written a line in my life." Whereupon Signor took up his parable and remonstrated, "Ah, now, you would not have made your Arthur speak like that!" And the great man instantly turned penitent and putting out his hand said, "Well, there, look at my hand; it is the gout!"

'For these two days they were much together, Signor still delaying to arrange for the sittings, and Lord Tennyson being under a promise to his son to let the suggestion come from the painter. However, as he was saying goodnight that second evening, obedient no longer, he said, "When are you going to paint me?" and an arrangement was made for the next day. Early next morning Signor woke with all the symptoms that the undertaking of such a portrait inevitably brought, and hours of depression followed when comfort seemed far. Indeed as the time for starting grew near, I began to fear the day was to be wrecked in this nerve-storm and had hastily to scribble a note to Hallam begging him to come himself with the carriage they were sending, and I also arranged that canvas and paints were to be hidden away in the carriage before Signor appeared; and thus interested in other things while Hallam talked to him, without a thought of his work he was driven off. A quarter of an hour after our arrival a message came to me, in Mrs. Hallam Tennyson's sitting room, to say that "Signor was at work, and that they were both quite happy." After a beginning had been made, the dread of the undertaking seemed to pass like a cloud, and from this morning all went well . . .

'While the portrait was being painted in Lord Tennyson's room his son sat beside them and read aloud. If the sitter was given a little respite, he liked to take a turn in the sun; and would take one of us with him, to admire his shrubs then in full blossom, perhaps to enjoy his Judas tree, of which this year he was particularly proud. Once under a laburnum he

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asked me if I thought "dropping wells of fire" was not a true description. Some critic had written that it was not fire at all; "not coal fire certainly", he said, "but little golden flames of fire, or so at least it seems to me"; and he looked up into the branches with the eyes that saw and could reveal the most secret movements of nature, and yet by the irony of fate were extraordinarily shortsighted . . .

'As the portraits¹ grew, the grandeur of the poet's head in life seemed to be more and more revealed. I noticed this to Signor, and he replied, "That is what a portrait painter should do, not by accentuating or emphasising, but rather keeping in mind those lines which are the noblest. What I try for is the half-unconscious insistence upon the nobilities of the subject." Certainly the poet's whole aspect was full of these nobilities . . .

'Signor had been at work at Farringford, while Miss Liddell and I had spent the morning together under a big elm on The Briary lawn, and when one o'clock came we went to meet the party, as Lord Tennyson and his son had arranged to walk back with Signor. We had just climbed the little rise that led to a broad green glade when the three came in sight, and we both exclaimed! For down the great aisle of elms they came, a white Russian deer-hound flashing like silver through the sun or shade, and the central figure the poet, a note of black in the midst of the vivid green, grand in the folds of his ample cloak and his face looming grandly from the shadow of the giant hat. "Monumental", Signor would have called him. The slight stoop and the heavier step of age made the youthful figure of the son look all the more what he was, his father's vigorous staff and prop. And then our eyes fell upon the delicate grey figure of our beloved painter on the other side, the grey hat crowning silver hair, a grey cloak taking pleasant folds while he stepped like a boy, light and neat in every movement. Lord Tennyson was playful, gave us a smiling greeting, and put out the crook of his walking-stick for us to shake hands with.

'As we went on towards The Briary the teeming life of nature seemed to turn their thoughts to a life beyond this life. Lord Tennyson quoted with regret the saddest epitaph he knew, written by a friend who had no belief in a future; and then with moistening eyes he gave us the triumphant words placed over a woman's grave: "I have loved, I love, I shall love", but given in the terse Latin—"Amavi, Amo, Amabo" . . .

'But the end of May had arrived,² and one portrait at least was complete. Signor felt that he must get back to work in London; so our last day came

¹ Two were painted.

² The portraits of Tennyson are: The first, a profile (1857) now in the Melbourne Gallery; the second, known as the Eastnor portrait (1859); the third, painted at the time when he painted Lord Tennyson and the two boys; fourth, Sir William Bowman's, and at the same

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round, and the last hours were spent in Farringford, listening for the last time to the poet reading his own poems. They were wonderful hours, and when the goodbyes were said, Lord Tennyson stood under the portico waving farewells until the carriage had passed out of his sight; and he from ours, for this life.¹

When Watts heard of the poet's death he was very shaken, and took up a piece of paper and tried without success to express his feelings in poetry. He fell ill for a few days and was unable to be a pall bearer at the funeral. He would grow very agitated when *Ulysses* was read:

*It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles whom we knew.*

Had he not often discussed immortality with the poet?

[iv]

On February 23rd, 1897, Watts was eighty. Mary had taken him to 6, Melbury Road in anticipation of the event. In the morning the directors of the New Gallery arrived to present an address of congratulation signed by famous men. There was only a handful of friends present when Mr. Comyns Carr read out the sonnet Swinburne had specially written for the occasion.

*High thought and hallowed love, by faith made one,
Begot and bare the sweet strong-hearted child,
Art, nursed of Nature; earth and sea and sun
Saw Nature then more god-like as she smiled.
Life smiled on Death and Death on Life: the Soul
Between them shone, and soared above their strife,
And left on Time's unclosed and starry scroll
A sign that quickened death to deathless life.
Peace rose like Hope, a patient queen, and bade
Hell's firstborn, Faith, abjure her creed and die;
And love, by life and death made sad and glad,
Gave conscience ease, and watched good will pass by.
All these make music now of one man's name,
Whose life and age are one with love and fame.²*

time one in the National Portrait Gallery; the sixth, in his doctor's robes, now at Trinity College, Cambridge; the seventh, in his Peer's robes, now at Adelaide. Both these last were painted in 1890. But the grandest monument to Tennyson is the huge statue at Lincoln Watts executed in the last years of his life.

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 158, etc.

² MS. in possession of Watts Gallery, Compton, Guildford.

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After the reading he was presented with a bronze portrait medal, 'Our Titian of Limnerslease', as Mary called it. Then the president of the Arts and Crafts Society came forward with another address. In the afternoon there was a large children's party.

A fortnight later he was persuaded to attend a concert in honour of himself and Joachim. He let Mary know he hoped it would give as much pleasure to others as it was misery for himself. Once there, however, he chatted away very happily with Burne-Jones and the evening passed off well. Back at Limnerslease he received a laurel wreath by the post at breakfast. He was delighted when a child who was staying in the house placed it on her head.

[v]

'It was quite a new life for him', Mary wrote of a visit to Scotland, 'and we made many expeditions. One was very memorable. The oldest crofter on the place, in his ninety-second year, had confided to my brother that before he died he would like to go just once more to the top of "dear Dunvardil" and my brother was bent on getting Signor up to this high point also. It is a beacon pile, one of a chain that traverses Scotland, and upon which the Fiery Cross once blazed from South to North.

'We had a glorious day and after luncheon in a cool green glade, the party numbering twenty, set forth single-file up the narrow track of the ascent. Signor, the old crofter, and another of the party were mounted. Signor's great black horse, borrowed from a farm near, looked like a war-horse of the Middle Ages, and the riders helped to make the string of pilgrims through the deep fern look all the more picturesque.

'The rock holds its bare glittering head "in the illimitable air", and the wild goats live in its caves and hollows; on one side it drops steeply in the brown river at its foot. It is connected with the Cuchulain Saga by the story of *The Three Sons of Usnach*, Deirdre, the wife of the eldest brother Naoise, having left her name to the rock, "Hill of Dearduil" while Naoise in all probability became Loch Ness. The old crofter, James Gow, told us that day that the rock was once the castle of a princess. When the three sons went back to the false king and to death in Ireland, Deirdre, having foretold their doom, sang her lament, weeping as she looked back on Scotland.

*Beloved is the land that yonder land,
Albion full of woods, full of lochs,
Sore is my heart to be leaving thee:
But I follow Naoise.*

'Some forty feet from the top the riders dismounted and the three horses were left in a patch of green mountain grass, which I remember was



29. RIDER ON THE WHITE HORSE

1897



30. MARY SETON WATTS

1887

LAST IMPRESSIONS

starred with the largest white flowers of the Grass of Parnassus I had ever found.

‘There was a scramble to get to the top, but the view there was magnificent. The old crofter felt he was one step nearer heaven. He took off his blue bonnet, and reverently bent his head, and in beautiful sounding Gaelic answered to nature’s call to prayer. Then he asked for my brother’s two children, and gave them a Gaelic blessing.’¹

[vi]

But the end was still delayed some years. He passed his eighty-fifth birthday. He had become almost a legend. Friends, journalists and sitters all agreed that age seemed only to have mellowed him.

Then in June, 1904, he retired one night early to bed with a sore throat, and gradually as the month wore on he sank. ‘One morning’, Mary wrote, ‘he beckoned to us to come nearer, and he tried to put into words a state of vision he had been in when he appeared to be neither sleeping nor waking. He had looked into the Book of Creation, and understood that the whole could be comprehended—made plain from that other point of view which was not our earthly one. “A glorious state”, he called it, and we looked on the face of one who had at last seen “true being” when he said “Now I see that great Book—I see that great Light”.’²

As he died he moved his arms as if attempting to fly. On the first of July the end came, and as it came the journalists jostled each other on the steps of Little Holland House waiting for the news. Soon, when it became known, the little porch was filled with flowers—among them a large bunch of violets said to have come from Ellen Terry.

Watts’ ashes were buried at Compton. In the adjoining fields the labourers passed to and fro ploughing fresh furrows for another harvest.

¹ M. S. Watts, ii, p. 291.

² *Ibid.*, p. 323.

XII

SOME CONCLUSIONS

[1]

Compared with his rivals and predecessors in High Art, Watts is conspicuous for the indecisiveness of his character. This is especially true when he is contrasted to Haydon who was his predecessor. Haydon was a forthright man of the world, a Tory and High Churchman. He had a good eye for character and a robust sense of humour. He was, as he would have put it, a man of bottom.

Poor Watts was very far from being a man of bottom. He was more introspective and had more taste. But he lacked for that reason Haydon's vigour. After his return from Italy there is little, save the idea, that is bold in his work. And especially in his lack of genuine humour is he at a disadvantage when compared to Haydon. If Haydon could not have painted *Choosing*, Watts could not have succeeded with such a subject as *Punch or Chairing the Member*. He tried to prove on one occasion to a critic that he had a sense of humour by painting the *First Oyster*. He proved that he mistook fun for humour. (*The habit does not make the monk.*)

With Haydon we are in the real world, but there is something distastefully remote about Watts' larger compositions. Allegory, to be successful, must be based on experience. Watts' allegories were not, and they seem to belong to the sick room. Timid by nature, his association with the Hollands and then the Prinseps reinforced this weakness. Isolated as a man, the failure of the Historical School to materialise also isolated him as a painter. He did not have to meet life as others knew it, and he turned away to the hothouse of his dreams. Had he been a Blake or a true mystic he might have benefited. But Watts was neither mystic enough nor original enough to profit by the personal and artistic isolation of his life.

The career of Alfred Stevens who was born in the same year as Watts and was sent to Italy at an early age provides an interesting contrast. In many ways their aims were alike. But whereas Watts was cosseted by the Hollands and the Prinseps, Stevens had to fight hard against poverty. Whatever may have been lost by his difficulties, there is no hint in Stevens' work of that remote and neurotic aspiration which so often displeases in Watts' allegories. He is deft, sensuous, easy where Watts is often fussy and hesitant.

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But it is not fair to Watts to compare him only to his superiors. The truth is Watts towered above most of his contemporaries. One has only to think of Leighton, Alma Tadema and the late Millais to see why. 'Watts at least [according to Roger Fry]', wrote Virginia Woolf, 'had always stood out against the view that "art is only an amusement and luxury for the idle and preferably the uneducated rich, that the artist is after all, in sentimental phrase, a *fille de joie*". Whatever his own deficiencies as a painter, this entitled him to an eternal place of honour among the great "riot of commercial philistines" who had reduced Victorian art in Roger Fry's opinion to a level of incredible baseness.'¹

For too long Watts has been judged by his inferior later work. The early painting is perhaps less individual, but how much better it is! It is grounded in the tradition and sentiment of the English School. In *Miss Hopkins* there is the influence of Lawrence, while *The Wounded Heron* is a careful and accomplished painting of still life—the antithesis of his later work. Coinciding with his visit to Italy, a more ambitious style emerges. The early style has not been superseded but the sentiment is more individual. To this middle period of the sixties and seventies belong *Fata Morgana*, *Mischief*, *Mrs. Huth* and the *Ellen Terry* portraits. These are fine large pictures in which the early technical accomplishment keeps pace with the conception, as yet uncontaminated by fake loftiness and spirituality. If Watts is judged by his early and middle period, and not on the merit of his late pictures (which by misfortune were the most popular and readily accessible to the public), his reputation would stand very much higher. It has not been his enemies who have ruined Watts' fame: it has been the ridiculous over-praise of his later work by his ardent admirers.

[ii]

When Watts said that his one aim was to express an idea and not to paint well he was making the grand artistic betrayal. It was not the greedy commercial betrayal of Millais who will always typify artistic prostitution. It was a betrayal that was not only unnoticed by his contemporaries—almost alone Butler called it 'brag'—but was indeed made the object of admiration. Watts, without knowing it, was insidiously led astray by a will-o'-the-wisp similar to the renegade Pre-Raphaelite's. He had nobler weaknesses than Millais. Instead of money Watts pursued fame.

Hand in hand with his great artistic gifts there went a blind and urgent vanity. Like his hero, Tennyson, Watts could not be content with his gifts. Portrait painting was not enough. He must paint frescoes, then alle-

¹ Virginia Woolf. *Roger Fry*. London, 1940, pp. 115-116.

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gories, then ideas. From the seclusion of his studio he longed to influence the world outside. He wanted to be not only the Michelangelo of his age, but the moral adviser as well.

Intended by nature to be a portrait painter, Watts tried to make himself a thinker in paint. He gained fame by it, but it was a perversion of his gifts which posterity will condemn. For, after all, how can it be otherwise when Watts' 'message' is so very ordinary?

Watts' 'message' ran something like this: A good Spirit pervades the universe (*Dweller in the innermost, The all-pervading*). It is, however, difficult to prove anything and we must be tolerant (*Spirit of Christianity, To all the churches*). This spirit seems to work in the world through evolution (*Progress*). We must remember this and learn to accept personal suffering which is the inevitable concomitant of Progress. All is for the best. Therefore aspire to great things (*Aspirations*), seek truth (*Sir Galahad*), hope when it seems hopeless—it isn't (*Hope*). Remember love can help us along (*Love steering the boat of humanity, Love and Life*) and though death may seem to destroy love (*Love and Death*), this is not the case for love triumphs over death and time (*Love Triumphant*). Death is not to be feared. It is like a messenger (*The Messenger*) who leads us to a better land where all that is wrong here is put right.

In the worst sense of the word this is sentimental. As W. B. Yeats said: 'Ah Watts, yes. His literature was bad.' It is bogus mysticism, imagined, made up, but not experienced. It has not even the merit of someone else's experience, which it would have had if he had been content with the Christian ethic. But Watts' desire to be universal amounted almost to megalomania. In consequence his primary conceptions of love and life are grotesquely unreal. In *Love Triumphant* there is some attempt at vigour, but it is an empty rhetorical vigour that deceives no one. A man who could paint love with so self-satisfied and egocentric an expression cannot have understood the self-abnegation of a lover. And the man who composed *Love and Death* so academically cannot have felt the sorrow of bereavement, or was incapable of expressing it. Certainly Watts gave Death great dignity, but was not his conception founded rather on a wish than on experience?

Critics often argue that Watts' portraits are more successful than his allegories because in them he was not tempted to point a moral. But the criticism is not quite true. For the same fault of the allegories is present in the portraits—over-emphasis of the intellectual qualities at the expense of the pictorial. Instead of painting what was before him he not only ennobled—legitimate enough in a grand mannerist—but he also interpreted it. His lady admirers told him that they never knew their friends until he

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had painted them. Watts came to make it his aim to paint the soul. In this connection it is instructive to compare the early *chapeau de paille* portrait of Lady Holland with the portraits of Tennyson. Instead of placing the sitter according to the canons of art, only too often the head floats out from a sea of darkness like a disembodied spirit.

But generally, and especially in his youth, what a good portrait painter Watts was! When he had a noble and simple subject—like all Victorians he was a hero-worshipper—he painted as well as any English portrait painter has ever done. As no-one else he managed the grand and the monumental. And he was extremely clever in his art, however much he might persuade himself to the contrary. In his portraits he was at pains to express the lower lid, a feature which demands such subtle treatment that most portrait painters omit it entirely.

[iii]

Mrs. Barrington considered that Watts' preoccupation with morality was due to his Evangelical upbringing. Certainly there is a lot to be said for this point of view. But it rather explains the form of his interest in ethics than the cause of it. The cause might be more plausibly, if tentatively, explained in another way.

It does not need a psychologist to trace Watts' instability to the influence of his father. The second Mrs. Watts was acute enough to put down his nervous headaches to the early rows in the Watts household. The elder Watts was not the sort of person to be gentle with his son. Naturally delicate and lonely, the future painter could not but be moulded by his father's ambitious interference. There was no mother or other children of his own age to dissipate the pressure. And so the young Watts dreamed his father's dreams that he should be the perfect painter. And he continued to dream them to the day of his death.

And yet he wanted to be more than the perfect painter. He wanted to realise his life more fully. Haven of retreat though his studio was, it sometimes seemed a prison and he longed to escape from it. If only he had the physical strength he would do it, but, alas, he had not! *Hugh Lupus* and *Physical Energy* are the pure expression of this wish. (Rodin's *Penseur* is exactly the opposite kind of wish.) The idea of preaching followed naturally, especially at a time when it was considered right that an artist should have a message. Watts made of morality a bridge over which he could cross from the seclusion of his studio into the world of ordinary men. *Mammon*, painted after reading an (apparently bogus) account of the white slave traffic, shows very clearly this desire, and his lack of success in carrying it out.

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Nothing pleased him so much as to feel that he was 'influential'. He treasured the letters people sent to him about the moral influence of his pictures. And Mrs. Barrington noticed that he was never so happy as when a party from the East End of London came to his studio. Talking to them and trying to influence them through his art he felt he was truly in touch with the real things from which his father, his patrons, and the failure of the Historical School had isolated him.

There was, moreover, another influence which tended to draw Watts in the direction of intellectual painting. The theory of the Grand Manner had arisen at a time when the artist was attempting to raise his status in society and Grand Mannerists had always been liable to usurp the boundaries of their profession. They argued that art was something more than paint and canvas, more than mere representation. It was not merely art, it was Fine Art and had an important function to perform. Such a theory was the rationalisation of Watts' aspiration.

It was no accident that Barry chose as subject for his famous undertaking at the Society of Arts no less comprehensive and intellectual a subject as 'Human Culture'. Haydon, when he committed suicide, was in the middle of a series of six pictures which were to have illustrated 'the best government to regulate without cramping the liberties of mankind.' Watts' preoccupation with ideas outside the realm of painting was nothing new in English art. Nor, indeed, was the poverty of his ideas anything new either. The reputation of Benjamin West in the first years of the Nineteenth Century was not unlike Watts' a hundred years later.

[iv]

If it should be said that I make Watts intelligible and indeed *possible* only by explaining away his virtues, I can only answer that a great deal of what his contemporaries considered to be virtues were nothing of the kind. But they were not vices—from a biographical point of view it might have been more interesting had Watts been in private a monster of iniquity. But he was not. It is almost too tempting to besmirch the erstwhile saint, but in truth Watts was no worse than the rest of mankind. Lack of self-knowledge is certainly at the worst only a venial sin. And in a great deal Watts was better than most men. He was generous without ostentation, sympathetic to a fault, almost completely master of professional envy, and sweetly tractable in disposition. Of how many can so much be truthfully said? Certainly of very few famous artists.

Of course, for a Lytton Strachey, Watts is too vulnerable to be worth consideration. There is no fun in an Aunt Sally that falls at the first throw.

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But, surely, even the most insensitive must find some sympathy to mix with his criticism, when the circumstances that brought about Watts' weaknesses are remembered. Watts never had a chance to develop as a normal man. From his cradle his destiny was thwarted by the meddling of his father, and all through his life a smiling Fate led him further and further into the labyrinthine prison of his neurotic condition. His often grotesque aspirations, the strange voltefaces that Mrs. Barrington noted with such candour, the fissures that cleft his personality are not so amusing when we consider that we see in Watts the figure of a wounded man of genius desperately trying to adapt himself to his surroundings.

Fatally weakened by his early environment and then by his admirers, his very great gifts were only too often dissipated. Place *Love Triumphant* beside his early portraits, and the tragedy is manifest. He could not but reach for the stars, and his hands were empty. Had he been content with less he had achieved who knows what heights. Even so, his early work, and a fraction of his later, give him a unique and important place in the history of English painting.

*Lately our poets' loiter'd in green lanes,
Content to catch the ballads of the plains,
I fancied I had strength enough to climb
A loftier station at no distant time,
And might securely from intrusion doze
Upon the flowers thro' which Illissus flows.
In those pale olive grounds all voices cease,
And from afar dust fills the paths of Greece.
My slumber broken and my doublet torn,
I find the laurel also bears a thorn.*

APPENDIX I

LETTERS FROM RUSKIN

Ruskin had called on Watts soon after the latter's return from Italy, and a spasmodic friendship had developed. Ruskin had been sincerely impressed.

'Do you know Watts?' he had written to a friend. '*The man who is not employed in Houses of Parliament—to my mind the only real painter of history or thought we have in England. A great fellow, or I am much mistaken—great as one of these same Savoy knots of rock—& we suffer the clouds to lie upon him, with thunder & famine at once in the thick of them. If you have time when you come to town, & have not seen it, look at the *Time & Oblivion* in his studio.*'¹

Ruskin was tiresomely imperious and Watts was lectured about his art. He was even rather frightened by the critic's gigantic energy. But it was a hopeless task Ruskin had set himself. An apostle of the Grand Manner was the least likely person to be won over to realism. But if imperious, Ruskin was also warm-hearted and encouraging. Coming into the studio one afternoon he found Watts in despair. He had signed a picture 'G. F. Watts Finis.' Without a moment's hesitation Ruskin took a piece of charcoal and scribbled 'et initium'. It was a kind act which was not forgotten.

But the friendship did not develop till Watts was established with the Prinseps. Then Ruskin was a frequent visitor and correspondent.

One of the first letters was from Watts, after his second visit to Italy. 'I have been to Venice: you are right—' here the rest of the sheet is torn off. On the other side the letter continues: 'I can better understand now why I fail; Titian, Giorgione, and all the most glowing and gorgeous translations of the Venetian School have rendered Nature as I feel her—as I would render her—but my imagination is not vivid nor my memory powerful. In Venice especially the exquisite colour of the time tinted stone against the splendid sky gave me ideas of combinations such as I have scarcely ever seen even in those great masters I have named. The fine bearded heads, grandly coloured chests and limbs every moment being presented to view, made me long for colours and brushes. Under the influence of the glowing sun every object is presented in a manner so in

¹ *Complete Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook & Wedderburn, Lond., 1904, Vol. xi, p. 30.

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harmony with my own feelings that the whole language of Nature seems to me perfectly intelligible.¹

But they came closest together when Rossetti persuaded Val Prinsep to join the other Pre-Raphaelites in Oxford to decorate the Union. Watts had welcomed the idea at first, but later he began to have misgivings that Rossetti's mediaevalism was not suited to Val's temperament. He wrote to Ruskin about it, and explained that he felt it to be his own fault.

DEAR WATTS,

18th October (1858)

I was very glad to have your letter—entirely feeling with you in this matter—& even more culpable than you charge me with being; for I am answerable for a good deal of this fatal mediaevalism in the beginning of it—not indeed for the principle of retrogression—but for the stiffness & quaintness & intensity as opposed to classical grace & tranquillity—now I am suffering for so far yielding to my own likings—I've almost got sickened of all Gothic by Rossetti's clique:—all the more that I've been having a great go with Paul Veronese.—I was six weeks at Turin working from a single picture of his—a bit here & a bit there—came to great grief of course: but I learned a great deal: more than I ever learned in six weeks—or six months—before. I will try & get hold of Val this week and have a serious talk with him—I see well enough there's plenty of stuff in him—but the worst of it is that all the fun of these fellows goes straight into their work—one can't get them to be quiet at it—or resist a fancy if it strikes them ever so little a stroke on the bells of their soul—away they go jingle-jingle—without ever caring what o'clock it is.

When can I see you?

Sincere regards to Mrs. Prinsep

Always yours affectionately

J. RUSKIN.²

For the most part the letters were about painting.

'I was thinking after I left you yesterday', Ruskin wrote, 'that you were mistaken in the botany of one of your pictures. Forget-me-nots do not grow on graves: *anywhere* but on a grave. Neither do they grow among thorns, but by sweet, quiet streams & in fair pastures (Psalm xxii. 2-3).'³

DEAR WATTS,

(1859)

If I said I could not criticize figures, I made a mistake. I should have said I could not criticize the 'drawing' of figures—i.e. placing of

¹ G. F. Watts, i, p. 144.

² Compton collection of letters, Vol. 5. And for all others not noticed otherwise.

³ *Complete Works of Ruskin*, xxxvi, pp. III-III2.

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bones & muscles. This I feel to be the foundation:—but I only cannot criticize when there is nothing *but* foundation for me to criticize. When there is neither definite fault—nor definite merit—in the superstructure. I don't think I shall ever repent of any of those *desperate* sayings—whether about Flaxman—Domenichino—Salvator—or any other of my delectations. I've never repented of any of them yet. I think Flaxman's Dante simply damnable—his Homer only less ridiculous because a little surreptitious—hints here & there taken from Greek vases. We'll have a talk over them some day.

Ever affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

I think my want of knowledge of bones affects me in figure judging precisely as my want of knowledge of ships does my criticizing shipping—I should not venture to decide whether Stanfield or Muggins painted a ship most accurately—but should fearlessly say that a bit of Entirely Wrong ship by Turner was worth a whole fleet painted by either.

Saturday Evening.

29th Sept. (1860)

DEAR WATTS,

I am very glad to have your letter to night, having been down-hearted lately—and unable to write to my friends—yet glad of being remembered by them. I have kept a kind letter of Mrs. Prinsep's by me ever so long. It came too late to be answered before the birthday of which it told me.

I will come and sit¹ whenever and wherever and as long as you like—I have nothing whatever to do—and don't mean to have: I hope to be at National Gallery on ——— ——— ——— —see end of note—& Thursday afternoons.—2 to 4—not exactly working—but wondering. I entirely feel with you that there is no dodge in Titian. It is simply right doing with a care and dexterity alike unpractised among us now a days: it is drawing with paint as tenderly as you do with chalk. I am so glad to know that I have yet to send you that last volume,² for I will bind it in two; it is too thick as it is, adding proofs of plates and some etchings cancelled because I had not time to write about them—but with some better work perhaps than any in the book: it will be perhaps ten days before I can get it done—but it shall be in binder's hands on Monday.—Is anybody at Kensington now—at Little Holland house I mean? I should like to come over and see Mrs. Prinsep the first time she is at leisure—

Ever affectionately Yours.

J. RUSKIN.

¹ Ruskin was never painted by Watts. Watts said he would have been too afraid to do it.

² Modern painters.

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I suspect that Titian depended on states, and times, in colouring more than we do—that he left such and such colours for such & such times always, before retouching and so on—but this you would not call dodge—would you—but merely perfect knowledge of means. It struck me in looking at your group with child in the Academy,¹ that you depended too much on blending and too little on handling colour: that you were not simple enough, nor quick enough, to do all you felt;—nevertheless it was very beautiful. I should think you were tormented a little by having too much feeling.

If it is fine tomorrow, Tuesday, I have promised to take a drive with my father, but the *second* fine day, whatever that may be this week, I hope to be at Trafalgar Sq.

DEAR WATTS

(October 3rd, 1860)

I hope to see you tomorrow at Nat. Gall.—and to see paintings at Kensington next day or Saturday. You know that there is not the slightest doubt about your power of colouring, or doing anything else you like—if only you will do one thing at once, and not go for feeling & colour together.

Ever affectionately Yours

J.R.

(5th Nov. 1860)

Yes, Rossetti's a great—great, fellow & his wife's as charming as the reflection of a golden mountain in a crystal lake which is what she is to him.

DEAR WATTS

I'm so glad you like your book—you say you don't like having asked for it—but it was just because I considered your asking for it, a great piece of praise & help, that I wanted you to have it in a nice form.

I'm very sorry you are ill—but am sure you may do what you like in painting without anybody's criticism—help—or any other interference if only you will resolve to meet the difficulties one at a time, not in serried squares.

Ever affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

Sincerest regards
to all friends

MY DEAR WATTS

(Feb. 5th, 1861)

Kind thanks for writing to ask for me. I'm not unwell, materially, but furiously sulky, & very quiet over my work—& mean to be so: and

¹ Mrs. George Cavendish Bentinck and her children.

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having been hitherto rather a voluble & demonstrative person—people think I'm ill. I'm not cheerful certainly, and don't see how anybody in their senses can be.

I did not say—did I—that you were not to aim at all qualities; but not all *at once*. Titian was born of strong race & with every conceivable human advantage—& probably before he was 12 years old, knew perfectly all that could be done with oil paint. *We* are under every conceivable human disadvantage and we must be content to go slowly—If you try at *present* to get all Titians qualities you will assuredly get none. You not only *have seen* Titians & Correggio's which united all—but I don't suppose you ever saw a true Titian or Cor. which did *not* unite all. But that does not in the least warrant you in trying at once to do the same. You have many things to discover—which they learned with their Alphabet—many things to cure yourself of which their masters never allowed them to fall into habit of. For instance from long drawing with chalk-point you have got a mottled & broken execution, and have no power of properly modulating the brush. Well—the way to cure yourself of that is not by trying for Titian or Corr. whose modulations are so exquisite that they perpetually blend invisibly with the point-work: but take a piece of absolute modulation—the head of the kneeling figure in Mr. ———'s [illegible] three Graces at Kensington for instance, and do it twenty times over & over again restricting yourself wholly to his number of touches—or thereabouts. Then you will feel exactly where you are and what is the obstacle, in that direction to be vanquished; you will feel progress every day; and be happy in it; while when you try for everything—you never know what is stopping you—Again—the chalk drawing has materially damaged your perception of the subtlest qualities of local colour. When a form is shown by a light of one colour, and a reflex of another, both equal in depth, if we are drawing in chalk, we must exaggerate either one or other—or the form must be invisible: this habit of exaggeration is fatal to the colour vision:—to conquer it you should paint the purest and subtlest coloured objects on a small scale—till you can realize them thoroughly:—I say on a small scale—otherwise the eye does not come to feel the value of points of line. This exercise—nearly the reverse of the modulation exercise could not be healthily carried on together with it. And so on with others. I write with an apparently presumptuous positiveness: but my own personal experience of every sort of Feebleness is so great that I have a right to do so—on points connected with it.

—Sincere regards to all friends,

Ever affectionately yours

J.R.

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The correspondence breaks off at this point for some time and is renewed by an apology from Ruskin. Ruskin was growing less interested in Watts' work than he had been.

(Nov. 1863)

DEAR WATTS,

Indeed I love you much, and it was *not* ill-treatment of you—I was too ill to care to see any one & it would only have hurt you to see me: so tired & sad I was about many things. *Now* I've given up everything, but friends—and dinners—so judge if I won't come & dine with you.** I shall like to see you all again so much.—Only I'm just home for a week. Just now I'm going into the country on Monday—and I can't arrange for anything before that—but I'll be back in no time & at home all the winter. I mean to try & see you in the forenoon before Monday but mayn't be able—but I think I shall.

Always affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

** Not that I would dine with many people—because friends and dinner are too good to have at once—I like to eat like a bear—& hug afterwards—but to growl over my bones.

May 14th, 1864

DEAR WATTS,

I find all my appleblossoms (nearly) on the ground this morning in fading snow—so I won't let you come to me for a fortnight yet when I shall have got some flowers out—& some strawberries ripe, I hope—and some Jones's¹ sketches framed, but I shall beg of you to come, then—very earnestly.

That haystack & Colleone²—and this new della Morte Madonna, stay by me—but you know—You must learn to paint like Titian!

Ever affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

Denmark Hill, S.

Wednesday, 25th July 1866.

MY DEAR WATTS,

I learned today from Edward³ that he thought you would like to come & see me—or me to come to you—You have not been here for ever

¹ Burne Jones.

² The words haystack and Colleone refer to the small landscape called "All the air a solemn silence holds" [by Watts], an impression he received when riding home one evening; both stacks and trees were close to Little Holland House. The other picture is known as "The Court of Death". Mrs. Watts' note.

³ Burne Jones.

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so long—can you come out any day & breakfast? (—and we'll have a nice talk) Or would you rather I should come in the afternoon? (I rarely stir in the morning.) I want to see you—I've been very ill and sad, lately—or should have managed it.

Mrs. Prinsep wrote me a kind letter some time ago—dated from some 'Bay' or other. I answered—to the somewhat vague address. Please tell her I did so, or she may have thought what was in the letter had hurt me and that I had not answered, but I was glad of the hint, though I was not permitted in any way to act upon it.¹ Send me just a line to say what day you could come & see me.

Ever affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

G. F. WATTS ESQ.

Ned says you have been doing beautiful things:—And therefore I should like to come, (as you won't exhibit—and leave MacClise's 'death of Nelson' to edify the public of taste)—but I think you would enjoy *one* picture here.

In 1871 the correspondence found fresh impetus from Ruskin's foundation of 'Fors Clavigera', a monthly letter 'to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain', and of the Guild of St. George which was to be enrolled from serious persons who wished to remake 'Merrie England'. The members were to give a tithe of their earnings, Ruskin himself paying £7,000. It was a Utopian scheme to wean England from industrial materialism. Watts was enthusiastic about it and quickly wrote offering his services.

'I hope you fully understand that I intend to join you in your scheme, though I am not sure it will result in any practical success. I know nothing about that, perhaps it is entirely Utopian. I don't care, it is a protest against Mammon-worship, and the giving up of everything in the desire to "get on"—characteristics of the age I cannot but deplore. Whilst I perceive that they are natural, at least I wish to add my name to the list of those who think that humanity, & even society is capable of better objects. The assistance I can lend you will be but very little indeed, & I offer it only as a proof of sympathy. The tenth of my earnings I will give yearly, but that will amount to very little, for my professional (labours) are not valued in the market; and, after having worked indeed very earnestly for five-and-twenty years, I have not succeeded in realising enough to give me—after satisfying just claims—if I should be from accident unable to work, £50 a year. But that need not be thought of while I can work. I do not complain, I do not know that I even feel disappointed. The fault is mine, no doubt. If I had possessed real power, I should have commanded suc-

¹ Not explained.

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cess. The only thing that sometimes crosses my mind is that some of the many with worth & influence whom I have known, & who have professed to believe in my capacity & in the direction of my aim, might have shown without material difficulty the material sympathy without which I have failed to carry out my aspirations.¹

Denmark Hill, S.E.
10th May, 1871.

MY DEAR WATTS,

I am deeply grateful for your letter. You can of course help us in all the best and most noble ways. I do not move in any wise until next year when my purpose will be completely laid before all who care to know it. I will then hope that you will consider of it deliberately before giving it the sanction of your name.—I would fain have no man regret joining hand with me.

Ever affectionately Yours, J. RUSKIN.

G. F. WATTS ESQ.

Brantwood,
Coniston.
23 Jan^y 73

MY DEAR WATTS,

I am very grateful for your letter. I have been thinking often of you—and should have written to you, if my plan had been in any active progress. But as yet all is necessarily dormant, until, in Fors, I get my plan completely drawn out. It will take me many a month yet, but is being done: Do you see Fors? I meant it to be sent you regularly. & if it is not, tell me. Keep your money till you know more of what is to be done with it, but I'm glad to hear of your being so prosperous.

My kindest remembrances to Mrs. Prinsep, please.

Ever affectionately Yours

J. RUSKIN.

G. F. WATTS. ESQ.

Watts wrote to explain his financial liabilities.

Brantwood,
Coniston.
1st February 73

MY DEAR WATTS,

I am very glad of your letter, and that you are building a house² in the Isle of Wight—and taking care of the orphan girl;³ but I am grieved

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 264.

² The Briary.

³ Blanche.

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to hear of the threatened harm to eyesight. Your portraits are so good in points of character—though I think you always err somewhat on the resolvedly grand side—instead of giving people their little weaknesses, (for which we none of us now—nor anybody in the future, should like them a whit the less)—that I wonder you cannot enjoy yourself and feel truly and rightly employed—in making such records of the existing soul-world.

Meantime assuredly your first business is to lay by money for the future need—if it is to come, and you must not think about Fors. I shall not send it you till it becomes more practical—it is only telling people at present what you well know.

Love to Mrs. Prinsep

Ever your affect^y

J. RUSKIN.

In 1873 there was a collection of Old Masters exhibited at Burlington House. Watts and Ruskin met outside. Ruskin was in a vehement mood, and said aggressively that the Old Masters were all wrong because they did not paint exactly what they saw. He denied that there were truths more real than surface facts.

‘Paint that as it is!’ he cried, pointing fiercely to a scavenger’s heap of mud by a grimy lamp-post. ‘That is truth.’

They walked along talking as they went. And Watts thought he had moved the critic to some extent. But next day a letter arrived upholding Ruskin’s opinion. He said he feared he had been hypocritical in appearing to agree at all.¹

Bull Hotel,
Piccadilly.
but usually
Brantwood,
Coniston.
Lancashire
(Feb. 13th, 1873)

MY DEAR WATTS,

I am sometimes a little hypocritical in conversation. I took laughingly your charge of losing sight of all the points of things while I pursue one. But—seriously—you ought to know me better—I challenge you—(so far I am proud of what I have *done* though not of what I *am*)—to find any writer on art ancient or modern—whose range of sight is so microscopic and yet so wide as mine—and when you fancy I am losing sight of things, they are continually most in my mind. But I purposely veil every other part of my subject—that my reader may understand one at a time.

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 94.



27 MARY ANTÝ SIGNOR IN THE NICHE AT TIMNEBUCTOUE.



32. WATTS SITTING BEFORE HIS PICTURE
THE COURT OF DEATH

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As for breadth of sight—do you suppose there is any other man even among your most thoughtful and liberal friends, who can not only admit but intensely enjoy the good in De Hooghe & in Luini—in Reynolds and Angelico—in William Hunt, and Tintoret?

But not one of you—even of my best friends—have the least idea of the work I have done; precisely in getting my knowledge of my business—nor have you any notion of the power it gives me now to have steadily refused to be warped from the sight of the pure facts by my likings—Jones with all his power, paints still as weakly as a woman—is essentially a woman—because he paints what he *likes* in defiance of what *is*. You were yourself paralyzed for years by your love of the Greek style—you never made an entirely honest, complete unaffected study of anything. You drew [illegible] for instance—trying to make an angel of her—she was not an angel, by any means—The soft chalk translation of her did you deadly mischief at every touch—in the deliberate falsification. You fancy you see more than I do in nature—you still see life—for I, long ago, learned how impossible it was to draw what I saw—you still struggle to do so, that is to say, to draw what you like in what you see without caring about what others like—or what God likes.—In saying all this—I retract nothing of what I said of my discontent with myself—nor do I equal myself for an instant with Jones or you in personal power of thought or deed—I merely speak as a poor apothecary's boy, who had honestly watched the actual effect of substances on each other might speak to (when he got old, and did know precisely what gold and lead were) two learned and thoughtful physicians, who had been all their lives seeking the philosopher's stone.

Ever affectionately Yours,

J. RUSKIN.

But Watts had already stated his case. It is contained in the draft of an undated letter which Watts was to have sent Ruskin in the earlier part of their friendship.

'I have been thinking a great deal about yr remarks & the tendency of your criticisms, & I cannot help inflicting some tiresome observations upon you, not, I beg you to understand, with any reference to my own things: my own views are too visionary, & the qualities I aim at are too abstract to be attained, or perhaps to produce any effect, if attained. My instincts cause me to strive after things that are hardly within the province of art, things that are rather felt than seen. If I worked to please myself only, instead of making a weak & insufficient compromise, I should make outline compositions filled upon a monochromatic principle, & in my not

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elaborate efforts aim at nothing beyond the highest & noblest beauty of form, truth of movement & general colour. I confess that, failing so greatly, my work never gives me the slightest pleasure. I cannot bring myself to labour upon a thing that disgusts me, & my instinct rebels against imitation. I will do a bit some day just to show you I am capable of it. Perhaps it is not necessary to say all this about myself, but I want you to feel & believe that my remarks are made not as an artist, but as an amateur. Like you, I am most interested in the progress of art, & believe it can only be great by being true; but I am inclined to give truth a wider range, & I cannot help fearing you may become near-sighted. That I feel with you with regard to earnestness & truth in painting must be evident from my agreeing with you in admiration of certain productions; but I do not agree with you in your estimation of truth, or rather your view of truth. It appears to me that you confound it too much with detail, & overlook properties; & that in your appreciation of an endeavour to imitate exactly, you prefer the introduction of what is extraneous, to the leaving out of anything that may be in existence. Beauty is truth, but it is not always reality. In perceiving & appreciating with wonderful acuteness quality and truth of accident, you run some risk of overlooking larger truth of fundamental properties. In fact you are rather inclined to consider truth as a bundle of parts, than truth as a great whole.

‘I venture to say this to you, because your opinion has great weight, & your judgment is listened to with great respect & I want you to consider well, & walk round the truth, viewing it from distance as well as examining it with a magnifying glass, lest your eye & taste, becoming microscopic, fail at length to take in the length & breadth.’¹

They were growing more and more apart. When he had written of Watts in the *Stones of Venice* Ruskin had been very appreciative. ‘We have as far as I *know* at present among us, only one painter G. F. Watts who is capable of design in colour on a large scale. He stands alone among our artists of the old school in his perception of the value of breadth in distant masses & in the vigour of invention by which such breadth must be sustained; & his power of expression & depth of thought are not less remarkable than his bold conception of colour effect.’² But in 1875 he was much less sure. He was writing of the Academy of that year to which Watts had sent *Dedicated to all the Churches*. ‘Here, at least, is one picture

¹ M. S. Watts, i, pp. 91–93. Some of the ‘letters’ which Mrs. Watts used for her book, one of which is reproduced here, were really drafts from which a letter may or may not have been sent. Watts was bad at expressing himself, and always felt shy when addressing a writer, especially so fierce a person as Ruskin.

² *Complete Works of Ruskin*, xi, p. 36, note.

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meant to teach; nor failing of its purpose, if we read it rightly. Very beautiful it might have been & is in no mean measure: but as years pass by, the artist concedes to himself, more & more, the privilege which none but the feeble should seek, of substituting the sublimity of mystery for that of absolute majesty of form. The relation between this grey & soft cloud of visionary power, & the perfectly substantial, bright, and near presence of the saints, angels, or Deities of early Christian art involves questions of too subtle interest to be followed here; but in the essential force of it, belongs to the inevitable expression in each period, of the character of its own faith. The Christianity of the 13th century was vividly present to the thoughts & dominant over its acts, as a God manifest in the flesh, well pleased in the people to whom He came; while ours is either forgotten, or seen, by those who get truth in Him, only as a mourning & departing ghost.¹

The correspondence, however, continued. But they were now like old school-fellows musing on the past. It gave both of them pleasure to think they once had been friendly. Year by year one or two letters about Christmas time were written. Meantime Ruskin was getting very feeble.

Brantwood,
Coniston,
Lancashire.
2nd April 1883.

MY DEAR WATTS,

I have, literally this moment, 20 min. past 12,—found in a packet of note paper which it had slipped into in some confusion of posting, your letter of Jan. 27th—which you may easily conceive would not have remained without thanks but for the mischance aforesaid—the like of which every now and then happens exactly with the letters I should least choose it to happen.

I ask—not for pardon but pity—for indeed I've lost all sorts of possible pleasure, now these three months—in losing that letter.

By the will of Fors, I find it precisely as I am thinking over you and your work, to be placed as far as I am able to do so in your great position as Interpreter and Interpretation of noble mythology, with Burne Jones in the next lecture I have to give at Oxford.²

If my health is really spared to me to continue this work I trust we may have happy times together, yet.

Ever your affectionate J. RUSKIN.

¹ Notes on some of the principal pictures in the Royal Academy, 1875.

² The lecture contained next to nothing about Watts.

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Brantwood,
Coniston,
Ambleside.

31st Dec. 84

DEAR WATTS,

I am so very grateful for your letter but please remember I don't live at the Athenaeum now. I retired because I grudged my 6 gn. a year when I never went there—the above is always safe address. I'm very weak and ailing this Christmas, and can scarcely hope for a good New Year for anybody except perhaps Miss Alexander¹ and her mother, to whom I've forwarded your note on the instant. I've ordered the *Roadside songs* to be sent to you regularly and am ever your affect

J. RUSKIN.

Brantwood,
Coniston, Lancashire.

23rd Feb. 85

DEAR WATTS,

So many and many thanks for your letter and interest—and so many and many more—thrice over for the lovely expression of your admiration of the Madonna in the Rich man's picture—never did a painter ever give to any one more impartial or unselfish praise. I hope your own strength will soon return to you—it is very dreadful to be laid up for seven weeks, but after all the world is more cheerful when one gets well again. I have thrown off that gloomy fit, and am fairly at work again—much helped by having that lovely book to edit and old friends to care for me still.

'Brighton' is rather a vague address. I send this to London—tell me if Brighton will do another time.

Your loving always

J. RUSKIN.

The next was from London.

Arthur Severn's
28 Herne Hill S.E.

What lovely times you must have had painting those two girls?² I think I shall set up in my old age for a portrait painter—Landscape is dull—by itself.

DEAR WATTS,

It has been one of the chief & few things I promised myself of un-mixed pleasure in this London to come and see you—but I've been merely

¹ An artist they both admired.

² Rachel and Laura Gurney—later Lady Dudley and Lady Troubridge.

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lost in the smoke till this Sunday, when I've pulled myself together—and laid out my days as I would & could for the week.

on *Thursday*

May I come to you in the early afternoon—any time after two & before 5—suppose 3? for a quiet chat with you and I? If it can't be then—I'll manage another day, but then would be best at ease

Ever your loving

J. R.

[1885]

MY DEAR WATTS,

I have not often been more glad of any letter than I am of yours, for I feared I had displeased you by my last and I am very grateful for your sympathy & promise of help for St. George. I think the real cause of separation between any of us who might better understand each other is really in the conditions of society, which are all artificial & uncomfortable—and one never sees enough of one's friends, or works enough with them—But I always have been—as I see & feel you have been to me.

affectionately yours,

J. RUSKIN.

G. F. WATTS, ESQ. R.A.

The last letter from Ruskin was short and badly scrawled. The old man had spent himself. He was no longer fierce and referred to Watts as one of his 'own *loved* friends' and signed himself 'your lovingest J. Ruskin.' Ruskin was one of the people who presented Watts with a grand piano and the last time he signed his name was for the scroll presented to Watts on his eightieth birthday.

It was Watts' wish before he died to paint his old friend, whom he still held in high veneration.

'My dear Ruskin,' he had written in 1886, 'I wonder whether I shall ever see you again. Perhaps never for I work from dawn till dark and see hardly ever anyone but I am always on the point of writing to say your works are the things which give me the greatest pleasure (excepting the practice of painting & sculpture & here I get from failure to do what I want as much pain as pleasure). Your writing, which I constantly read, gives the greatest pleasure I know, & whether I agree with all your dogmas or not I acknowledge your objects are always good & noble & sympathise with more than I can say. I wish I could have done better things & earned your approval of my efforts, but I do greatly care for what is good in art & all else & though but a poor creature believe me to be yours very sincerely [G. F. Watts].'¹ He had feared to paint the critic before, but

¹ Another draft letter, among the papers at Compton.

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now he heard that Ruskin was very quiet and spoke 'little & in short sentences.' It was a long journey to Coniston, but Watts determined to make the attempt. At the last minute he fell ill and had to give up the project.

'Dear old friend, master & best teacher', he wrote in Aug. 1893, 'I had hoped and meant to present myself at Coniston, and indeed all was arranged even to provisionally engaging a railway carriage, but I had an attack of an old enemy which put the journey out of the question.

'I cannot imagine a greater pleasure than a talk with you would give me, I think we should have much to say.

'I want also to thank you for your part in the matter of the piano! I am bad at thanks and to tell an ungracious truth dislike receiving presents, (this is the first of any importance I ever got in my life) besides feeling that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive.' I cannot help feeling that there is considerable danger of the habit growing into a very serious tax, this is seen in the practice of giving wedding presents, where most is given where least is needed, still I am grateful to my friends for the delightful proof of remembrance so little deserved by me, for I never go anywhere or see anyone who does not come to me and never do anything nice and amiable for anybody. I am sorry to hear that you have given up writing, for there is so much to say and teach in these days of transition; I cannot feel but that civilisation having gone so wrong very great and radical changes are inevitable, and perhaps very near, I wish every voice that can be raised with authority should be heard.

'I have these matters greatly at heart, perhaps we may yet have some talk upon these and other things in the meantime believe me to be most sincerely and affectionately

Your old friend

G. F. WATTS.

ditto Signor.'

It was the last letter to pass between them, for Ruskin died in 1900. Watts was to have been a pall bearer, but ill health prevented his being present. Instead, he cut the poet's laurel which grew in his garden and made a wreath of it.

APPENDIX II

WATTS' VIEW OF HAYDON

I am afraid', writes Mr. Watts¹ 'you will think I have forgotten the promise I made to give you my opinion on the characteristics of Haydon's art. But the fact is, I find it very difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion. Sympathising sincerely with him in his views upon art to their utmost extent, naturally inclined to appreciate the qualities he aims at, and doing full justice to the power and amount of knowledge displayed, I am surprised to find how little I am really affected by his works, and how difficult it is to retain any very distinct impression of them. This corroboration of public opinion in my own feelings I have been endeavouring to account for. When any qualities beyond common experience and knowledge, and about the most ordinary comprehension, are aimed at, the public estimate can only be valuable when it has received the fiat of time; but when the first difficulty has been got over, and the public interested, it is rare that what is really good has failed to maintain its place.

'I think we shall find, upon examination, that all art which has been really and permanently successful has been the exponent of some great principle of mind or matter—the illustration of some great truth—the translations of some paragraph out of the book of nature. If Haydon read therein and strove to expound the lesson, he read too hastily to understand fully, and did not, like Demosthenes, take pains to perfect a defective utterance. His art is defective in principle and wanting in attractiveness—not sufficiently beautiful to please—not possessing those qualities of exact imitation which attract, amuse, give confidence, and even flatter, because they, in a manner, take the spectator into partnership, and make him feel as if they were almost suggestions of his own. This is what I have seen, and what I would do, if I had time to paint; *anch'io son pittore*.

'The characteristics of Haydon's art appear to me to be great determination and power, knowledge and effrontery. I cannot find that he strikes upon any chord that is the basis of a true harmony. The art of Pheidias translated and expressed perfection of form in its full dignity and beauty; that of Angelico, Perugino, Francia, and Raphael religion; that of Mi-

¹ This is from the first edition of Tom Taylor's *Autobiography of Haydon*. It was expanded into a treatise on High Art in the second edition. Watts also toned down his criticism of Haydon because Haydon's son objected. M. S. Watts, iii, p. 81.

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chael Angelo the might of imagination; the greater of the Venetians were the exponents of the power of nature in its rich harmony of colour; Correggio is all sweetness; Tintoretto is the Michael Angelo of colour and effect; Rubens is profuse and generous as autumn; and, if he is sometimes slovenly, he is so jovial and high-spirited that one forgives everything.

'All these, and many others, worked with earnestness and conscientiousness. Absolute truth, in combination with abstract qualities, or without them, will always successfully appeal to the spectator's intelligence. Haydon seems to me to have succeeded as often as he displays any real anxiety to do so; but one is struck with the extraordinary discrepancy of different parts of his work, as though, bored by a fixed attention that had taken him out of himself, yet highly applauding the result, he had daubed and scrawled his brush about in a sort of intoxication of self-glory . . .

'I have pointed out all the things that strike me as errors, because I know that you fully appreciate the greater qualities, as I do, and because many of these defects you will fairly ascribe to the unfavourable conditions of his life. His first great work, the "Solomon", appears to me to be, beyond all comparison, his best. It is far more equal than anything else I have seen, very powerful in execution, and fine in colour. I think he has lowered the character of Solomon by making him half a joker, but the whole has, at least, the dignity of power. Too much praise cannot, I think, be bestowed on the head of Lazarus; and in the absence of such important evidence as the "Entry into Jerusalem" would afford, it is hardly fair to pass judgment.

'It is somewhat remarkable that the only man who can be said to have formed a school in England after the manner of the Italian artists is perhaps the only artist of any eminence who has had no imitators.'

And the editor adds: 'I believe that this criticism points out, honestly and accurately, the defects of Haydon's art, taking for granted, rather than expressing, its countervailing beauties.'

APPENDIX III

G. F. WATTS AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY COMMISSION

In the following year,¹ 1863, to consider the need of a separate building for the Royal Academy—at that time occupying a part of the National Gallery—and other measures for extending its usefulness, a Royal Commission was held before which the President, Sir Charles Eastlake, and several members of the Academy, with a few outside of this body, were called to give evidence. Amongst these last were John Ruskin, Holman Hunt and G. F. Watts. The general tenor of Signor's evidence reveals his ever-constant desire that the Academy should stand as a great national institution for the encouragement of great art, and for the elevation and cultivation of the national taste; and that it should be recognised as a body entirely devoid of the element of a personal and professional clique.

For this reason, he proposed that there should be a certain proportion of non-professional men elected as Members of Council; and he did not think the want of practical technical knowledge in these lay members would be in the least degree an objection. He considered that the non-professional element might more fairly represent the opinion 'out of doors' than could the general body of artists themselves. 'The non-professional man would be without predilections,—not entirely—no one is—but without any special taste for one style of painting.' In the schools he strongly advocated a reform in the system of teaching, especially in the antique school, the most important of all, as there the pupils lay the foundations of all art—the drawing of the human figure.

He suggested that a specially competent teacher should be always there, and that, while the students drew from casts, demonstrations should also be given from time to time from the living model. 'I would demonstrate the action of the limbs, and the use of the muscles, from the living model in combination with the antique. It is impossible to learn much about the human form by merely drawing the figure in a set position.'

He would like to see sculpture, painting and architecture connected together as one and the same, and that students should be encouraged to study the whole range of art as much as possible. 'I look upon architecture

¹ M. S. Watts, i, p. 212.

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as one of the most important branches of art. I lament the *three branches*; they were not considered as three formerly, but were combined in one and the same man.'

The more they are combined the better it would be for art in general. Above all things he wanted to see the Royal Academy students, under the supervision of an accomplished artist, trained to make designs, or even to copy designs, such as Flaxman's, upon wall spaces and on a large scale; not only because he considered that the practice of mural painting was of paramount importance, but that also it might lead to a more general diffusion of art, giving the public a very much greater opportunity of seeing something beautiful, both in colour and line. 'At present', he wrote to Lord Elcho, one of the Commissioners, a few days after giving his evidence, 'it is a melancholy fact that hardly a single object amongst those that surround us has any pretension to real beauty, or could be put simply into a picture with noble effect; and, as I believe the love of beauty to be inherent in the human mind, it follows that there must be some unfortunate influence at work. To counteract this should be the object of a Fine Art Institution, and I feel assured that if really good things were scattered amongst the people, it would not be long before satisfactory results exhibited themselves.'

Lord Elcho propounds the grave question, with mischief lurking in his look, no doubt, 'Is the system a sound one in your opinion, of giving panels in a corridor to different artists, to be decorated according to their own notions?' 'I must disapprove of it very much, the result of it must be inharmonious.' And again in the same spirit he asked the question, 'Whether, under arrangements more favourable to the selection of the best art for our public places, we should have had at the present moment the Duke of Wellington's statue on the arch at Hyde Park?' And Mr. Watts replies, 'I think there would have been a chance that we should have had a better thing.' It is clear that the Commissioner and his witness understood each other.

The Chairman, Lord Stanhope, asks, 'Have any other points occurred to you in which you think alterations for the better might be made in the Royal Academy?' Mr. Watts replies, 'It is very difficult to point out how the Academy might be improved, and I have not given much attention to the subject; but, considering the position the Academy holds, it has displayed very great apathy. I do not see its influence in our architecture, our fashions, or our taste in general, in any way whatever. The only National School which has grown up at all has grown up outside the Academy, and indeed in opposition to it, that is the Water Colour School; and the only definite reform movement (which the Pre-Raphaelite School may be

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called) was certainly not stimulated by the Royal Academy, and even met with opposition from it.'

Chairman: 'You ascribe the fact which you have mentioned to some defect in the Royal Academy?' 'It seems to me that there must be some defect. If the members were extremely anxious to develop taste, or to encourage art, I think that some means could have been found. A merchant finds means if he wants to improve his commercial arrangements; whatever a man wishes to do he finds a way of doing it more or less satisfactorily. But I do not see that the Royal Academy has done anything whatever.'

'I must beg to say, in making these remarks, that I have no kind of feeling against the Royal Academy. Many of the members whom I have the honour to be acquainted with I esteem very much indeed. They have always displayed to me great consideration, and indeed, kindness, and as I was never a candidate for the honour of membership I cannot say that I have been overlooked; and I have not the smallest personal feeling of any kind against them.'

In the supplementary letter to Lord Elcho, after giving evidence before the Royal Academy Commission, Signor wrote: 'I insist upon mural painting for three reasons—first, because it is an exercise of art which demands the absolute knowledge only to be obtained by honest study, the value of which no one can doubt, whatever branch of art the student might choose to follow afterwards; secondly, because the practice would bring out that gravity and nobility deficient in the English school, but not in the English character, which being latent might therefore be brought out; and, thirdly, for the sake of action upon the public mind.'

Of the benefit of studying the old masters he wrote: 'The great Italian masters worked unquestionably upon some principle (for technique); no one can undervalue the practical importance of placing at the disposition of the student means of expressing his ideas much sooner than he could possibly find them out for himself.'

APPENDIX IV

WATTS AS A TECHNICIAN

by

THE CURATOR OF THE WATTS GALLERY

Watts's early painting was influenced by Lawrence and Etty. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the so-called silver picture was painted in rivalry to the golden picture of the Old Masters. The old painters, with their chiaroscuro, were going out of fashion, and were referred to as 'The Black Masters'. In the silver picture, breadth lay in the middle tones and greys, and the accents, instead of being made with lights tended to be darks. Watts did many small pictures in this light key. *The Wounded Heron* and *Miss Hopkins*, both in the Compton Gallery, are good examples. Few people would know such pictures were by Watts and there must be many hanging unidentified in country houses. They are carefully but deftly painted.

After his visit to Florence, Watts came under various Italian influences.¹ The small version of *Lady Holland* in the Compton Gallery, seems to mark the transition stage. Here the beautiful transparent greys are obtained by passing white over a warm glaze. This sketch appears to be in an unfinished state and an underpainting, probably with lean oil and in grey, has been glazed with brown and subsequently coloured with scumbles and glazes. This is very like the practice of William Etty.

But in Italy Watts was especially attracted by fresco. After some unsuccessful attempts, in which he experienced difficulties with the materials, he made a compromise and painted his large *Tales from Boccaccio* (Tate Gallery) and *Echo* (Tate Gallery) with underpaintings of distemper on canvas. This has lasted well and has not shaled off in spite of the rolling of the canvases for travelling. Later in life Watts wished to revive this technical method but found no colourman in England who knew how to prepare a distemper which would not crack off the canvas.

The advantages of distemper are that it is lean, an advisable quality for an underpainting, and easy to handle over large surfaces. It must be remembered that Watts was not a strong man. In *Tales from Boccaccio* the

¹ Watts had several pictures of the fourteenth century Venetian School in his possession. He acquired them in Italy and brought them home to England.

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figures are over life size. In the fresco at Lincoln's Inn they are even larger. Distemper, glue colour or some kind of tempera or emulsion were frequently used by the Venetians, but as far as is known not by English painters in the eighteenth century, and in this practice he was reviving old traditions.

Watts evidently regarded fresco as an almost flat convention of silhouettes. In his evidence before the Commission in London, in 1863, he recommended the students should make copies of Flaxman's outline engravings and colour them and he described his own fresco at Lincoln's Inn as an attempt at flat monumental painting.

Chiaroscuro, or the conventional use of gradations of light and shade, is not suitable for true fresco, but possible in Watts's compromise with distemper, which was overpainted with oils. In *Tales from Boccaccio* the chiaroscuro is coloured and depends on rather violently contrasted masses of yellow and blue, but the figures are almost flat, with sharp silhouettes. The effect is crude except at a great distance. It is the kind of painting which depends very much on its situation. Large mural decorations in oil are not only difficult to keep stretched on their canvases, but are also apt to shine when light is reflected on their varnished surfaces. On the other hand, oil on canvas probably resists the damp of the English climate better than paintings on walls. If the effect of *Tales from Boccaccio* is rather obvious it must be remembered that this kind of painting was intended to be like martial music.

Later Watts came under the influence of Titian and Tintoretto, though he always disapproved of Tintoretto's force. Watts's oil paintings were built up on underpainting; colour was gradually added or, if the colour or tone became too dark, or raw, it was lightened and heightened into form by scumblings of white for which he sometimes used tempera. He also appears to have glazed with water-colour, subsequently fixing the tint with his vehicle. In later work he used petroleum, and as little linseed oil as possible, his paint being ground very stiff.

Watts refers to fresco painting as a manly style, meaning that, as alterations were difficult, the artist must paint directly and make up his mind. In Venetian oil painting, however, alterations were possible. When painting his late pictures he adopted a technical departure of his own, scumbling more than he glazed and by dragging his large horn palette knife on the surface of rather coarse canvases, got a broken touch.

But in the Venetian method of painting the medium was used more transparently. Warm and cold colours were laid over one another, half covering the under-layer. Greys were painted by passing white over dark, or glazing lights. The handling and brush work was really in the under-

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painting, which was vigorously painted to allow for the subsequent softening of their layers. Watts's later work modified this traditional method. In his large oils one sometimes feels what appears to be a compromise with fresco, as if the painter had not made up his mind whether to paint flat or in the round.

While many of his contemporaries were following the Pre-Raphaelites or the Illustrators, Watts, after his visit to Italy, reverted to the so-called 'Black Masters'. But though his pictures, at the end of the century, appeared conspicuously low in tone at the Academy, compared with the Alma Tademans and the slick portrait painters, with their copious use of solid white, Watts often achieved remarkable colour. His practice in painting, however, gradually became more opaque. He believed glazes caused oil pictures to darken and tried to eliminate oil as much as possible from his paint, applying the stiff pigment with a horn knife, with which he polished it flat. These pictures may have been luminous when they were first painted but they have now darkened and the surface is heavy and leathery. The picture of two amorette, named *I Know not Where*, is a good example of the success of this method, as far as technique is concerned, but as a rule opaque painting in a low key tends to be heavy.

Watts also executed some pictures on white grounds with a copal medium. I know of only one example of his use of a bolus ground, but he sometimes used vivid yellow grounds and the portrait group *Lady Lotbian and her Sisters* is painted so that a yellow ground strikes through in the sky and in the lighter parts of the red dress. Yellow grounds, however, were apt to make his flesh painting dirty and as oil paint gets more transparent with time, this effect increases with the age of the picture. The tradition is to underpaint flesh with cool colour, an example which he sometimes followed.

As is usual in Venetian painting, Watts used absorbent grounds, but as he used little oil or varnish his colours were apt to sink. Even to-day they have a curious tendency to absorb varnish and many of his pictures shown in the Tate have almost gone matt, a condition, of course, which was never intended by the artist. His pictures seldom crack; some of those painted with copal have a tendency to blister.

In his later work the idea is apt to predominate and does not always keep pace with his technique. His habit of putting his pictures aside and then taking them in hand again, months and sometimes years later, and 'regarding them with the eye of an enemy', led to many corrections, the original conception being defaced by another and sometimes the material gave out under his hand, and conception and treatment fell apart. At his death there were several large sketches of *Eve Repentant*, for example, and *Love and Death*, which were carried so far as to look almost like replicas of the

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pictures he finished later. *Love and Death* was eventually brought to a successful conclusion and is rightly one of his most famous pictures.

Watts was also interested in sculpture and executed the well-known picturesque *Physical Energy*. Perhaps *Clytie* is his most successful bronze. The combination of subtle anatomy with large monumental forms attracted him in the Elgin Marbles, and the influence of their form can often be traced in his later paintings. Greco-Roman and neo-classical sculpture he found too emphatic in its simplicity of plane, referring to it as 'ropes and pullies'.

In his letters to Watts, Ruskin makes some shrewd remarks. The critic pokes fun at the symbolism of the forget-me-nots and suggests Watts is tormented by feeling and tries for too many things at once, thus confusing his technical process. 'You depend too much on blending and too little on handling colour, that you are not simple enough, nor quick enough . . .'

'Titian', Ruskin wrote, 'may possibly have known all that could be done with oil paint before he was twelve years old', but he did not try for all qualities, at least not at the same time. He worked by deliberate stages. 'You', the critic went on, 'have many things to discover, which they (the Venetians) learnt with their alphabet, and many things to cure yourself of which their masters never allowed. . . ' Watts's answer, except in his objection to Ruskin's insistence on the illustration of detail, was more an admission than a retort. 'My views are too visionary and the qualities I aim at are too abstract to be attained . . . My instincts cause me to strain after things which are hardly within the province of Art (i.e. of painting).' Watts, however, could not bring himself to act on this knowledge; he continued to attempt the impossible, or at least what was beyond his power.

Yet Watts was one of the most learned technicians of his day. Sketches in the Compton Gallery, like the small version of *Orlando and the Witch*, *The Denunciation of Adam* and the larger picture, *Jacob and Esau*, may be pastiche for those who are exacting critics, but they are certainly masterly. The technique of oil painting had really been lost before the eighteenth century. 'Reynolds', said Samuel Palmer, 'insisted that it should be studied as a lost Art, of which we find that each of the most successful artists manages to recover a fragment sufficient for his need.' Sometimes Watts recovered triumphantly the fragment which he needed. His mistake was that his need was often too ambitious and too vague. In his search for subtlety he sometimes fell into that indistinctness which Turner so much prized, but which should not be mistaken for mysticism. The difference is made obvious when we think of William Blake. With all his superior technical knowledge Watts was less clear and less original in thought than Blake, with whom, however, he has some affinity.

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A complete bibliography would be useless because most of the books about Watts are inaccurate and sentimental. Many, indeed, were never intended to be anything but ephemeral. All the works from which I have quoted are mentioned in the footnotes.

The basis of any life of Watts is *George Frederic Watts, the annals of an artist's life*, by M. S. Watts, London, 1912, 3 vols. It contains most of the material known about him, and is accurate. But it has grave defects. The picture Mrs. Watts presents is far too one-sided. The Ellen Terry incident, for instance, is dismissed in a very few words. And the account of Watts' stay in Italy is out of date since the publication of Lord Ilchester's *Holland House*. Moreover the book is often rambling and confused. The index is sometimes misleading.

The best work for the light it throws on Watts' character is Mrs. Russell Barrington's *G. F. Watts, Reminiscences*, London, 1905. It is, however, marred by inaccuracy and has no index. It covers the short period immediately before the second marriage. Lord Ilchester's *Chronicles of Holland House, 1820-1900*, London, 1937, contains a good deal of material about Watts, especially when he was in Italy. The index is exhaustive. Ellen Terry's *Autobiography*, edited by Miss Craig, London, 1933, is necessary for a clear picture of Watts' first marriage.

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I have also made use, by kind permission of the Trustees, of the collection of letters at the Watts Gallery, Compton. Letters belonging to Mrs. Lilian Chapman have proved useful.

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RONALD CHAPMAN.

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